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LIFE WITH ITS LID OFF!

The Passionate Teaching Life
of Sylvia Ashton-Warner

MINDFIELDS PEOPLE

Abha Adams
Shaheen Mistri
Gopinath Nair

Why Learning Should
be Open Source

In Praise of Slowness

Talking to Your Child
About Sexual Abuse

Language and PYP:
Best Teaching Practices



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Third Quarter 2009

**WORLDLY WISE**

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Photos on Cover and Inside Covers: Akanksha Foundation

EDITOR'S NOTE



Featured in this issue is Sylvia Ashton-Warner's 1968 teaching memoir *Teacher* – a book that is now standard fare on educator bookshelves. What sets *Teacher* apart from most pedagogical tomes is that it is so eminently readable. No jargon, all heart – every bit as original and fearless as its author. Even her worst critics could not dispute Ashton-Warner's passion and creativity as a teacher. Or the fact that she instinctively brought to her classroom something has since become 'common sense' in teaching methodology (if not in practice): observation, meticulous documentation, diagnosing the need of the individual, and improvising to find the solution most relevant to a child. She remains a beacon of hope for the unjaded teacher.

Also in this issue, a line-up of Mindfields people: Shaheen Mistri talking about the inspiration behind Teach for India and Akanksha, ex-Motorola exec Dhananjay Joshi on what its like to give up a corporate career to teach highschool Math; author Mridula Koshy shares firsthand experiences in how to start talking to young ones about sexual abuse; scientist-toymaker-educator Arvind Gupta explains why learning ought to be open source; international best selling author Carl Honoré writes on the virtues of slowness in a world obsessed with speed...

Amruta Patil

Luke Haokip

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- Do you know a person whose work in the realm of education merits celebration?
- Do you know a school that fosters individual thinking, that is unafraid of taking the less beaten path?
- Do you know a teacher whose work and spirit make for sparkling classroom interactions?
- Are you a creative individual – scientist, historian, artist, poet, musician, writer - who knows how to cut through the jargon and talk about your work to lay people?
- Do you have an anecdote about an insightful, heartwarming interaction with a student or child?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes' – do write to us at editor@mindfields.in

We would be happy to have your suggestions and contributions translate into interviews, features, comic strips in our future issues.

Contributors will receive a honorarium and a free yearlong subscription to Mindfields.

life with its off!

THE PASSIONATE TEACHING LIFE OF SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER

"I like the lid off. I like seeing what's there. I like unpredictability...everything life is, uncovered. I hate covers of any kind. I like the true form of living, even in school, I'm in love with the organic shape." – Sylvia Ashton-Warner

Text and Illustration: Studio Umbilical

Writer, poet and educator, Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1908-1984) was one of New Zealand's most colourful literary figures. Her childhood was spent in poverty; her father, disabled, in wheelchair or bed; her mother, while bearing nine children, taught at an endless succession of schools. It was a united family, sharing hardships and domestic chores. Though Ashton-Warner's larger love was painting, writing and the arts, she saw it as destiny that her life be one of a teacher.

In 1932, she married Keith Henderson, also a student at the Teachers' Training College she went to. The couple took on various assignments in two-teacher schools in remote parts of New Zealand. This move was generally considered quite undesirable professionally: unrewarding and involving a high degree of isolation. In choosing this path, Ashton-Warner may have been seeking to regain the rural freedom she enjoyed as a child, or perhaps enjoyed a romantic image of herself working tirelessly at the frontier of civilization. She mentions Tolstoy's school and A.S. Neill's school as influencing her vision of education. Other influences include Dr. Erich Fromm, Bertrand Russell, Rousseau (prime mover of many an educational innovator) and, of course, Freud and the psychiatrists, (the



theory of the unconscious lay behind nearly all progressive thought in the inter-war years).

In 1938, Ashton-Warner had a nervous breakdown; an event that led to her meeting Dr. Donald Allen, the neurologist who encouraged her to write as a form of therapy. Apart from her teaching-related writing, Ashton-Warner produced several novels (of which 'Spinster' (1958) was made into a film starring Shirley Maclaine). However, her most acclaimed works remain the classroom memoir 'Teacher' (1963) and her autobiography 'I Passed this Way' (1979). It was Dr. Allen, too, who introduced Ashton-Warner to the idea that there were two opposing forces continually at work in the world – survival of the individual and survival of the species. Ashton-Warner relabeled these forces 'fear' and 'sex', and the concept was to be crucial in the development of her ideas about organic teaching and key vocabulary.

It was in the Maori village schools that Ashton-Warner evolved her stimulating, often pioneering, teaching techniques. Her commitment was to 'releasing native imagery and using it for working material' and she was of the firm view that communication must produce mutual response in order to effect a lasting change. She found the standard-issue infant reading books, with their picture-perfect white children, sailboats and manicured lawns, too far-removed from the reality of the brown children in her class. The Maoris were a passionate, highly social people who came from a past that was as legend-dominated as it was violent. It was Sylvia Ashton-Warner's belief that it was the children's

It was in the Maori village schools that Ashton-Warner evolved her stimulating, often pioneering, teaching techniques. She was of the firm view that communication must produce mutual response in order to effect a lasting change.



Sylvia sitting at her typewriter

personal stories that would provide them with the impetus to read. Slowly, there gathered stories about the Maori children's world. Drunken fathers and loving mothers, stillborn baby brothers and gregarious tribal gatherings at the pa. Ashton-Warner used these as foundation for special primer books she created for the Maori children, each copy painstakingly typed, hand-coloured and bound.

However, she was never without her share of critics – as much for her experimental classroom methodology as for her unconventional, volatile

personality. Detractors drew attention to Ashton-Warner's absences from school and excessive reliance on trainee teachers, her emotional breakdowns, her unpredictable artistic temperament (lore has it that she was once found dancing naked in the moonlight), her dependence on alcohol in later life, and what they felt was an unwarranted persecution complex against the 'system'.

Her book 'Teacher' is passionate and chaotic, as must have been Ashton-Warner's classroom. Even her casual comments go to the heart of things. For example, when she advocates the children using blackboards and chalk, their pictures and scribbles not made to last, she also deplores the hoarding of muses of carefully prepared classroom material, suggests scrapping the lot and starting anew. Learning to live is more important than acquiring knowledge. Indeed, Ashton-Warner saw no divide between Sylvia in the classroom and Sylvia in her private space. For her, it was a seamless part of the whole that was life. And she was determined to live passionately, no matter where or what. "Not just part of us becomes a teacher" she wrote in 'Myself'. "(Teaching) engages the whole self – the woman, man, wife or husband, mother or father, the lover, the scholar or artist...a worthwhile teacher is (one that) blooms from the worthwhile person."

"It is the contradictions in Sylvia Ashton-Warner's nature that puzzle and fascinate" observed her biographer, Lynley Hood. "How could such a self-absorbed woman develop a teaching method that so radiates understanding for children! For that matter, how could anyone

who claimed she never wanted to be a teacher, that she hated teaching and was never any good at it, make any worthwhile contribution to education at all! Let alone write a book hailed as one of the great educational works of the century."

Upon its release in New Zealand, *Teacher* was received with skepticism because of Ashton-Warner's bitter claims of being persecuted by local Education Department officials. "We had our grading this week. The men were well-marked...as usual I was very low. Maybe it is a distinction of some kind to be unacceptable in New Zealand teaching. I walk alone. (People like me are) 'rogues', the term critiques give to people they cannot classify" wrote a bitter Ashton-Warner in *Teacher* after being slighted by inspectors grading her performance as a teacher. However, proponents of alternative education in other parts of the world, particularly the USA, saw the book as humane and creative, and its author as being a heroine, a fiercely original and misunderstood creative person in a field dominated by fusty academics.

Ashton-Warner's observations about life and learning were made with trademark honesty and a straightforward style that was uncluttered by the pretensions of academia. Indeed, she strongly disliked the language of late twentieth-century educational writing – "verbose manhandling" she referred to it – and she worried about her own work falling "into the jaws of academic analysis in the unintelligible multisyllabic jargon" (*I Passed this Way*). Her own teaching-related writing is marked by refreshing simplicity

"The vision of a teacher is that of an actor on the educational stage, as a creator of new idea, rather than a passive receiver of prescribed orthodoxy."



Sylvia and her husband, Keith Henderson, ca 1932

and candour. It is half process journal, half memoir, made up of fragmented and deeply personal musings on life, art and sociology. Nothing was too facile to be recorded, emotions were not deemed un-academic, and she was quick to admit to mistakes and make amends in her method. Ashton-Warner was determined to draw upon her own observations and local context to form the body and bones of her teaching.

Ashton-Warner was a feminist voice ahead of her time; female thinkers and writers in the field of education were few in her day. Educators today see her major accomplishment as being that of working with children who are socially disadvantaged or from ethnic minorities. Her findings, for example, are strikingly relevant while teaching non-

English-speaking students. Also noteworthy is her development of educational theory from experience. The vision of a teacher as an actor on the educational stage, as a creator of new ideas, rather than a passive receiver of prescribed orthodoxy. "I am," Ashton-Warner once declared, "my own university."

VOLCANO WITH TWO VENTS

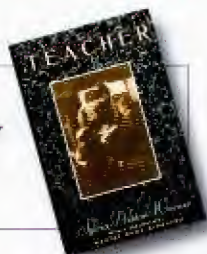
Sylvia Ashton-Warner believed that she had discovered a method of teaching that could make human beings naturally and spontaneously peaceable. Aggressiveness, an "instinct" without which wars could not arise or be conducted, is the name we give to mental or emotional reactions caused by the frustration of the child's inherited drives: self-preservation and sexual gratification. Education, in the form that is normally practised throughout the world, ignores these main interests. By recognizing (even welcoming) their presence in a child, Ashton-Warner tried to lay the foundation of what she called an "organic" method of teaching. This organic teaching allowed expression of both these drives, and moulded them into patterns of constructive delight. "I see the mind of the 5-year-old as a volcano with two vents: destructiveness and creativeness" wrote Ashton-Warner. To create is to construct, and to construct cooperatively is to lay the foundations of a peaceful community. As a prognosis of social ills, this notion is not new. But how does one begin to cure this universal neurosis? In Sylvia Ashton-Warner's words: Begin in the infant room. ■

ORGANIC READING IS NOT NEW

AN EXCERPT FROM SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER'S MEMOIR, 'TEACHER'

TEACHER

by Sylvia Ashton-Warner
Publisher: Touchstone
ISBN: 0671617680



Organic reading is not new. The Egyptian hieroglyphics were one-word sentences. Helen Keller's first word, "water", was a one-word book. Tolstoy found his way to it in his peasant school, while, out in the field of UNESCO today, it is used automatically as the only reasonable way of introducing reading to primitive people: in a famine area the teachers wouldn't think of beginning with any words other than "crop", "soil", "hunger", "manure" and the like.

Not that organic reading is exclusively necessary to the illiterate of a primitive race. True, it is indispensable in conducting a young child from one culture to another, especially in New Zealand where the Maori is obliged to make the transition at so tender an age; but actually it is universal. First words are different from first drawings only in medium, and first drawings vary from country to country. In New Zealand a boy's first drawing is anything that is mobile; trucks, trains and planes, if he lives in a populated area, and if he doesn't, it's horses. New Zealand girls, however, draw houses first wherever they live. I once made a set of first readers on these two themes. But Tongan children's first drawings are of trees, Samoan five-year-olds draw churches and Chinese draw Bowers. What a fascinating story this makes!

How can anyone begin any child on any arranged book, however good the book, when you know this? And how good is any child's book, anyway, compared with the ones they write themselves? Of course, as I'm always saying, it's not the only reading; it's no more than the first reading.

The bridge. It's the bridge from the known to the unknown; from a native culture to a new; and, universally speaking, from the inner man out.

Organic reading is not new: first words have ever meant first wants. "Before a nation can be formed," says Voltaire, "it is necessary that some language should be established. People must doubtless have begun by sounds, which must have expressed their first wants. ...Idioms in the first state must have consisted of monosyllables..."

In July 1857, Tolstoy wrote in his diary: "...and the most important of all: clearly and forcibly the thought came to me to open a school for the entire county."

Only two years later, in the fall of 1859, he came close to realizing his dreams. With the same passion with which he did everything, he gave himself to teaching. Almost to the exclusion of all other interests, he gave three years of his life to the peasant children. His work had nothing in common with the standard, well-regulated school systems. Tolstoy wrote that he had a passionate affection for his school. Under his guidance other young people who helped him in his work developed a similar "passionate affection."

As usual he began by discarding all existing traditions and by refusing to follow any method of teaching already in use. First he must fathom the mind of the peasant child, and by doing away with punishments, let his pupils teach him the art of teaching. In his school his pupils were free to choose their own subjects, and to take as much work as they desired. The teacher considered it his duty to assist the children in their search for knowledge by adjusting his method of approach to the individual child, and by finding the best way of proffering assistance in each case.

These free Tolstoy schools, without programmes, without punishments, without rules, without forcing the will of a child, were remarkably successful. The children spent entire days at their studies and were reluctant to leave the schoolhouse.

And one of the international volunteers in Kabylia in the mountains of Algeria writes: "About twenty children were sitting in front of the teacher under an ash tree and reading in chorus the name of their village which she had written on a big sheet of paper. They were enormously proud; time and time again they read us the word." "But the next evening three of the adults came to ask us to teach them to write their names." "Why do you want to write your name?" "One of them explained: 'To sign at the Post Office. If I can sign my name to collect a registered letter I shall not need to pay the witnesses.'" "And do you often get letters like that?" "Sometimes. From

my son in France.'

"We went steadily on; but in the evening, instead of resting under the mosquito net, we were all caught up in the fever of fundamental education."

Organic reading for beginners is not new; it's our rejection of it that's new.

THE KEY VOCABULARY

The method of teaching any subject in a Maori infant room may be seen as a plank in a bridge from one culture to another, and to the extent that this bridge is strengthened may a Maori in later life succeed.

This transition made by Maori children is often unsuccessful. At a tender age a wrench occurs from one culture to another, from which, either manifestly or subconsciously, not all recover. And I think that this circumstance has some little bearing on the number of Maoris who, although well educated, seem neurotic, and on the number who retreat to the mat.

Another more obvious cause of the social failure of Maoris is the delay in the infant room. Owing to this delay, which is due to language as well as to the imposition of a culture, many children arrive at the secondary school stage too old to fit in with the European group and they lose heart to continue. From here, being too young and unskilled to do a competent job, some fall in and out of trouble, become failures by European standards, and by the time they have grown up have lost the last and most precious of their inheritances--their social stability.

With this in mind, therefore, I see any subject whatever in a Maori infant room as a plank in the bridge from the Maori to the European. In particular, reading,



Sylvia Ashton-Warner and students.

Organic reading is not new: first words have ever meant first wants. "Before a nation can be formed," says Voltaire, "it is necessary that some language should be established. People must doubtless have begun by sounds, which must have expressed their first wants. ... Idioms in the first state must have consisted of monosyllables..."

So, in preparing reading for a Maori infant room, a teacher tries to bridge the division between the races and to jettison the excess time.

Children have two visions, the inner and the outer. Of the two the inner vision is brighter. I hear that in other infant rooms widespread illustration is used to introduce the reading vocabulary to a five-year-old, a vocabulary chosen by adult

educationists. I use pictures, too, to introduce the reading vocabulary, but they are pictures of the inner vision and the children choose the captions themselves. True, the picture of the outer, adult-chosen pictures can be meaningful and delightful to children; but it is the captions of the mind pictures that have the power and the light. For where as the illustrations perceived by the outer eye cannot be other than interesting, the illustrations seen by the inner eye are organic, and it is the captioning of these that I call the "Key Vocabulary."

I see the mind of a five-year-old as a volcano with two vents, destructiveness and creativeness. And I see that to the extent that we widen the creative channel, we atrophy the destructive one. And it seems to me that since these words of the key vocabulary are no less than the captions of the dynamic life itself, they course out through the creative channel, making their contribution to the drying up of the destructive vent. From all of which I am constrained to see it as creative reading and to count it among the arts.

First words must mean something to a child.

First words must have intense meaning for a child. They must be part of his being.

How much hangs on the love of reading, the instinctive inclination to hold a book! Instinctive. That's what it must be. The reaching out for a book needs to become an organic action, which can happen at this yet formative age. Pleasant words won't do. Respectable words won't do. They must be words organically tied up, organically born from the dynamic life itself. They must be words that are already part of the child's being. "A child," reads a recent publication on the approach of the American

books, "can be led to feel that Janet and John are friends." Can be led to feel. Why lead him to feel or try to lead him to feel that these strangers are friends? What about the passionate feeling he has already for his own friends? To me it is inorganic to overlook this step. To me it is an offence against art. I see it as an interruption in the natural expansion of life of which Erich Fromm speaks. How would New Zealand children get on if all their reading material were built from the life of African blacks? It's little enough to ask that a Maori child should begin his reading from a book of his own color and culture. This is the formative age where habits are born and established. An aversion to the written word is a habit I have seen born under my own eyes in my own infant room on occasion.

Back to these first words. To these first books. They must be made out of the stuff of the child itself. I reach a hand into the mind of the child, bring out a handful of the stuff I find there, and use that as our first working material. Whether it is good or bad stuff, violent or placid stuff, colored or dun. To effect an unbroken beginning. And in this dynamic material within the familiarity and security of it, the Maori finds that words have intense meaning to him, from which cannot help but arise a love of reading. For it's here, right in this first word, that the love of reading is born, and the longer his reading is organic the stronger it becomes, until by the time he arrives at the books of the new culture, he receives them as another joy rather than as labor. I know all this because I've done it.

First words must have an intense meaning.

First words must be already part of the dynamic life.

First books must be made of the

stuff of the child himself, whatever and wherever the child.

The words, which I write on large tough cards and give to the children to read, prove to be one-look words if they are accurately enough chosen. And they are plain enough in conversation. It's the conversation that has to be got. However, if it can't be, I find that whatever a child chooses to make in the creative period may quite likely be such a word. But if the vocabulary of a child is still inaccessible, one can always begin him on the general Key Vocabulary, common to any child in any race, a set of words bound up with security that experiments, and later on their creative writing, show to be organically associated with the inner world: "Mummy," "Daddy," "kiss," "frightened," "ghost."

"Mohi," I ask a new five, an undisciplined Maori, 'what word do you want!'"
"Jet!"

I see the mind of a five-year-old as a volcano with two vents, destructiveness and creativeness. And I see that to the extent that we widen the creative channel, we atrophy the destructive one. And it seems to me that since these words of the key vocabulary are no less than the captions of the dynamic life itself, they course out through the creative channel, making their contribution to the drying up of the destructive vent.

I smile and write it on a strong little card and give it to him. "What is it again?"

"Jet!"

"You can bring it back in the morning. What do you want Gay?" Gay is the classic over-disciplined, bullied victim of the respectable mother.

"House," she whispers. So I write that too, and give it into her eager hand.

"What do you want Seven?" Seven is a violent Maori.

"Bomb! Bomb! I want bomb!"

So Seven gets his word "bomb" and challenges anyone to take it from him.

And so on through the rest of them. They ask for a new word each morning and never have I to repeat to them what it is. And if you saw the condition of these tough little cards the next morning you'd know why they need to be of tough cardboard or heavy drawing paper rather than thin paper.

When each has the nucleus of a reading vocabulary and I know they are at peace with me I show them the word "frightened" and at once all together they burst out with what they are frightened of. Nearly all the Maoris say "the ghost!", a matter which has a racial and cultural origin, while the Europeans name some animal they have never seen, "tiger" or "alligator" using it symbolically for the unnamable fear that we all have.

"I not frightened of anything!" shouts my future murderer, Seven. "Aren't you?"

"No, I stick my knife into it all!"

"What will you stick your knife into?"

"I stick my knife into the tigers!"

Dennis is a victim of a respectable, money-making, well-dressed mother who thrashes him, and at

five he has already had his first nervous breakdown. "I'm not frightened of anything!" he cries. "Is Dennis afraid of anything?" I asked his young pretty mother in her big car.

"Dennis? He won't even let the chickens come near him."

"Did you have a dream?" I asked Dennis after his afternoon rest.

"Yes I did."

"Well then ...where's some chalk and a blackboard?"

Later, when I walked that way there was a dreadful brown ghost with purple eyes facing a red alligator on a roadway. I know I have failed with Dennis. I've never had his fear words. His mother has defeated me. During the morning output period--when everyone else is painting, claying, dancing, quarrelling, singing, drawing, talking, writing or building--Dennis is picking up my things from the floor and straightening the mats, and the picture I have of his life waiting for him, another neurotic, pursued by the fear unnamable, is not one of comfort.

~

But I have some dirty, thoroughly spoilt children next door who are never held up with fear. Their Key Vocabulary runs from "Daddy" and "kiss" through words like "truck," "hill" and "Mummy" to "love" and "train". How glorious are the dirty spoilt children.

Out press these words, grouping themselves in their own wild order. All boys wanting words of locomotion - aeroplane, tractor, jet -and the girls the words of domesticity - house, Mummy, doll. Then the fear words - ghost, tiger, skellington, alligator, bulldog, wild piggy, police. The sex words - kiss, love, touch, haka (Maori war dance). The key words carrying their own illustrations in the mind, vivid and powerful pictures which none of us could possibly draw for



Sylvia Ashton-Werner teaching at Whareonao, 1932

First words must have an intense meaning. First words must be already part of the dynamic life.

First books must be made of the stuff of the child himself...

...The key words carrying their own illustrations in the mind, vivid and powerful pictures which none of us could possibly draw for them, since we can't see them...

them, since in the first place we can't see them, and in the second, because they are so alive with an organic life that the external pictorial representation of them is beyond the frontier of possibility. We can do no more than supply the captions.

Out push these words. The tendency is for them together force once the fears are said, but there are so many variations on character. Even more so in this span of life where personality has not yet been molded into the general New Zealand pattern by the one imposed

vocabulary for all. They are more than captions. They are even more than sentences. They are whole stories at times. They are actually schematic drawing. I know because they tell them to me.

Out now these captions. It's a lovely flowing. I see the creative channel swelling and undulating like an artery with blood pumping through. And as it settles, just like any other organic arrangement of nature, it spreads out into a harmonious pattern; the fear words dominating the design, a few sex words, the person interest, and the temper of the century. Daddy, Mummy, ghost, bomb, kiss, brothers, butcher knife, gaol, love, dance, cry, fight, hat, bulldog, touch, wild piggy - if you were a child, which vocabulary would you prefer? Your own or the one at present in the New Zealand infant rooms? Come John come. Look John look. Come and look. See boats? The vocabulary of the English upper middle-class, two-dimensional and respectable?

Out pelt these captions, these one-word accounts of the pictures within. Is it art? Is it creation? Is it reading? I know that it is integral. It is organic. And it is the most vital and the most sure reading vocabulary a child can build. It is the key that unlocks the mind and releases the tongue. It is the key that opens the door upon a love of reading. It is the organic foundation of a lifetime of books. It is the key that I use daily with my fives, along with the clay and the paint, and amid the singing and quarrelling.

It is the key whose turning preserves intact for a little longer the true personality. It is the Key Vocabulary. ■

"School Principals have been demi-gods for too long"

Abha Adams has been in television, radio, theatre and the performing arts. She has been a teacher, a columnist with a leading national newspaper, the director of The Shri Ram School and Step by Step Academy, and an educational consultant. She talks to Rima Chibb about teachers, principals, learning, and how she manages to get so much done in one lifetime.

Text: Rima Chibb | Illustration: Studio Umbilical | Photos: Courtesy Abha Adams

R: You defy the stereotype of an educator. How have you synergized your diverse experiences into your work with schools?

AA: I wouldn't be able to make the contribution that I hope I'm making, if I hadn't had those varied experiences. Just yesterday the Principal of a school came to see me. I was taking her around the school and she said, "You know, you're nothing like what I expected you to be!" She had imagined that my hair would be the 'tyranny of the grey' and I would have it in a top knot. That's a stereotype of a school principal or a headmistress...you can't laugh and you can't joke and you can't be energetic.

I started life as a lecturer in English. In my core, I'm an educator. I think all educators have two characteristics. One, they enjoy learning. If you don't enjoy

learning, then you're not going to enjoy the teaching-learning experience... and you're not going to enjoy being with other people who are learning.

The other thing that I think educators share is that they love communication and they love people. If you don't enjoy people of different shapes, sizes and ages, and if you don't like communication, then you're not an educator. Now, I will happily admit I don't have a B.Ed. I've come across so many teachers who string on B. Eds, but can't get on with children. They know a lot; they have fabulous first-class Honors Degrees and Gold Medals, but the subject doesn't ignite.

The magical part of teaching and learning is what happens in that moment when transfer of information or knowledge, or an exchange of ideas takes place

between teacher and child. And that doesn't depend on a B.Ed. or an M.Ed. I might get shot for saying this but I've never believed that good teachers are those that necessarily come out of schools of education. So yes, I was involved with a whole deal of other things. When I finally ended up in school, I couldn't handle the attitude of well-entrenched senior teachers who would say, "No, can't do." I would say, "Why not? Have you tried it?" There is so much resistance to any kind of newness!

What theatre gives you, what working in the media has given me are new experiences. The ability to tackle new experiences whether you're interviewing somebody, shooting, or broadcasting from an OB van.

I was just very lucky to have come back to education via these journeys!



R: How do we create schools that foster genuine learning?

AA: First, a school has to articulate what it means by genuine learning. I have attempted to define it as a process which helps a child think independently and creatively, helps him or her analyze. Most schools only pay lip service to such definitions. Take an advertisement for any school and if you don't find the words 'creative', 'problem-solving', 'out-of-the-box', I'd eat my hat if I had one.

Schools not only have to make a commitment, they then have to work on a curriculum framework that focuses on embedding these skills. It's basically skill-based teaching.

In a class, with any concept you teach, you have to follow a particular cycle of teaching. It begins with a teacher getting a starter activity that grabs the attention of the child, followed by an explanation, followed by a period of research that children do in groups on different aspects of the concept. They return to share what they have done or discovered. Then, the teacher summarizes it in a plainer way and says, 'Okay class, this has been our journey in the 50

minutes today. I told you about this; you explored it. I gave you books and the Net to do the research.' They analyzed aspects. Then they came back and shared it. So, it's collaboration.

The teacher would have got a worksheet prepared that she gives to everybody or she asks questions or she sets an assignment for them to work on. So, students construct their own learning. And then they present it. Therefore, there is understanding. Then there is perhaps an activity where they apply it. This is followed by an assessment activity.

Done right, every class gives a child an opportunity to think, imagine, create, construct, share, communicate and reflect. The learning cycle is complete.

But it's not easy. You're asking teachers to teach in a way in which they haven't been taught. You're asking them to turn themselves inside out. They get terribly scared because they feel de-skilled. They think, 'I can't do this! I've been teaching in a certain way all along. Where's my textbook?' And you're saying, 'The textbook's there, but this is what you need.'

There's a need for a great deal of training, a great deal of commitment.

I started life as a lecturer in English. In my core, I'm an educator. I think all educators have two characteristics. One, they enjoy learning. If you don't enjoy learning, then you're not going to enjoy the teaching-learning experience... and you're not going to enjoy being with other people who are learning.



Abha Adams during her stint at the BBC



Abha Adams (extreme right) addressing a Principal's forum

You have to first place it in your vision. Then you have to ensure the academic programme, curriculum framework and teacher-training methodology reflect the vision.

R: You've been associated with change and innovation for over 20 years. Tell me about the education scenario in the 90s. How did you get the stakeholders together to become a school which chalked its own path?

AA: I had just returned from the UK then. What I came back to were a handful of schools like The Shri Ram School (TSRS) and Vasant Valley School that were trying to strike a different path. That path was that personalized attention was critical for the development of children; that children should enjoy the experience of school; that if classes were small and nurturing, it would ensure that children would love to come to school. If they love to come to school, that's half the journey. Then you try to make learning so enjoyable and challenging that they would love to remain in school.

I remember the first three years vividly. Most parents thought we were making guinea pigs of their children, that they would suffer in the Board examinations – even if

their kids were in Grade 6 and the Board examinations were six years away! There were concerns about there being no tests, no exams, how their Grade 3 child couldn't recite the table of twelve and the child in the other school could recite the table of 16. You needed to explain to them that there was no benefit in being able to parrot tables if the child did not understand the multiples of 16.

Learning has to be age-appropriate. Learning has to be skill-based. Learning has to be personalized because children learn at different paces. And there's a difference between testing and assessment. And that was a difference that parents couldn't see. The only assessment that parents knew were a paper-pencil test. They understand tests. But if you say, 'We're assessing' which means 'I got them to stand up and talk about the poem and I assessed them on that', it holds no weight because it's not tangible for the parent.

Then they had another problem. 'But my child will not be competitive.' And we said, So what's the problem with that? The child must do the best that he or she can do. Why does it matter that she has to do better than your neighbor?

Learning has to be age-appropriate. Learning has to be skill-based. Learning has to be personalized because children learn at different paces. And there's a difference between testing and assessment. And that was a difference that parents couldn't see.



At CII Conference

Large classes destroy people. When you have 45-50 kids in a class and a 30 to 40-minute period, where is the joy? How can you make a connection? How do you follow through the cycle of understanding, sharing, research? You don't. You can't.

R: But how do you get everybody on the same page?

AA: A great deal of talking. We held so many seminars. I think I didn't stop talking for 5 years, till they got so fed up of me really. But most importantly, before even the parents, it was the teachers. There was a great deal of working with teachers in small groups, through very intensive teaching programmes. Visioning, talking about the curriculum, getting them to see and commit to it.

The next stage was the parents. Within five years, the 'our children are guinea pigs' argument 'changed and 'small classes, quality control, low student-teacher ratios, project work, different ways of assessment, no examinations till class 6 but assessment all the way through' - this started becoming the norm.

Today, educational reforms are also reflecting exactly what happened so many years back.

R: What drove you as an educator to take this on... did you think you were doing was something revolutionary then?

AA: I didn't see it as a crusade or an educational revolution. The Shri Ram School (TSRS) had a very specific, progressive philosophy, so the vision and framework were already there - all I needed to do was flesh them out. I had seen excellent practices overseas and I wanted to replicate those practices here. And I was so fortunate because I was surrounded by unstoppable faculty and a management that gave us carte blanche.

R: What were some of the struggles in the rollercoaster ride?

AA: Getting the senior faculty onboard - getting them to see there was another way to do things. We used the Total Quality Management approach - if this is the mission, how do you translate it through policies, into your school's working. A huge number of systems also had to be put in place. Continuing to be centered was challenging. My job as Director was to ensure that the three TSRS schools stayed aligned.

R: Why should the so-called 'topper schools', which are getting good grades and the best of marks, be open to change?

AA: Grades are great, but you can't judge a school by grades. Are the children balanced, happy and wise? Did the school impact their lives?

A well-known artist friend who studied in Modern School under the legendary Mr. Kapoor told me this story. He said, 'I was just not interested in what was going on in the class. So I'd open my desk, prop

it up with a book, take pieces of chalk and small needles, and I'd be carving.' He had a row of little figures that he had carved out of small pieces of chalk, while pretending to be listening.

Once, my friend didn't see his teacher walking around class because he was so engrossed in his carving. The furious teacher marched him off to the Principal with a fistful of pieces of carved chalk. In the Principal's office, the teacher put the chalk on the table and said, 'Look at what he was doing'. And Mr. Kapoor looked at the carvings and said, 'These are beautiful! Young man, you have real talent. I would like you to put these on a base and I want you to display these at the annual show. And, pay a little attention in class. It will help you.' My friend said, 'I decided that day that I was going to be a sculptor.'

One interaction, which could have gone so horribly wrong, made him decide that he would be a sculptor. And today, he is world-famous.

That is what matters. Have your teachers impacted the lives of students? Given them something other than their marks?

R: It's hard to sustain the love of teaching. How does one keep enthusiastic teachers from getting jaded by the system?

AA: Large classes destroy people. When you have 45-50 kids in a class and a 30 to 40-minute period, where is the joy? How can you make a connection? How do you follow through the cycle of understanding, sharing, research? You don't. You can't.

Recently, we had a meeting with an excellent teacher who had taught for 20-odd years in a government system and now wanted to move



Aruna Chidambaram

You cannot educate children successfully unless you are in partnership with the parents. Parents are such a fabulous resource. You can't see parents as irritants. I often refer to it (parent-school association) as a marriage.

out. She said, 'You know, I tried so hard. I was idealistic - I wanted to teach at a particular level, I didn't want to go to the private schools. But I've been teaching 60 kids per class. And I do election duty. I do Census duty. I love my children but I feel completely destroyed after all the administrative nonsense that I have to do.'

Even in well-heeled private schools, teaching is quite relentless. There's an interesting research that says that teachers make approximately 3000 decisions a week. A child will say, 'I want to go to the toilet?' Now, even that's a decision. You're making split-second decisions all the time. They may not appear to be CEO kind of decisions. But they're pretty

important to the running of a school!

R: The educational reforms propose the formation of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for Teacher Training. Your thoughts on what the NCF should have to make education more "teacher-friendly"?

AA: Teachers should be allowed to do what they do best - learning and then teaching-learning. The more we embroil them in ancillary activities - census and election and every other State duty - it destroys the teaching-learning dynamic.

The NCF needs to change the working conditions of teachers in the State Sector, and give them autonomy. The most successful schools are those where teachers are empowered to teach and then left to it. Sure, monitor the teachers and pull up those who don't deliver. But celebrate those that do! Teachers need to be valued. There has to be more celebration of what they do. Schools that have good school cultures, celebrate the successes of their teachers

R: We all talk about teacher training but what about Principals? They need to be trained as well...

AA: For far too long, because of the dearth of supply and high demand, school principals have become demi-gods. I was asked, way back in my TSRS days, 'How does it feel to be so powerful?' I would wonder, 'Where is the power?' But clearly, the power lay in the admission process. I never saw myself in that light because the admission process would just break my heart, I feel strongly that it should be parental choice and not the other way around. We have no business playing god as schools.

Principals are managers of people in a learning institution. They need to focus on that. Not on the trappings

of power. But as long as this market remains driven by demand, and there's so little quality supply, it's going to be back to the command-and-control triangle.

A Principal alone cannot bring about change. It's only when it percolates to every single member of your team that change occurs. School cultures have to change. You need democratic, flat organizations where you work within teams and lead those teams.

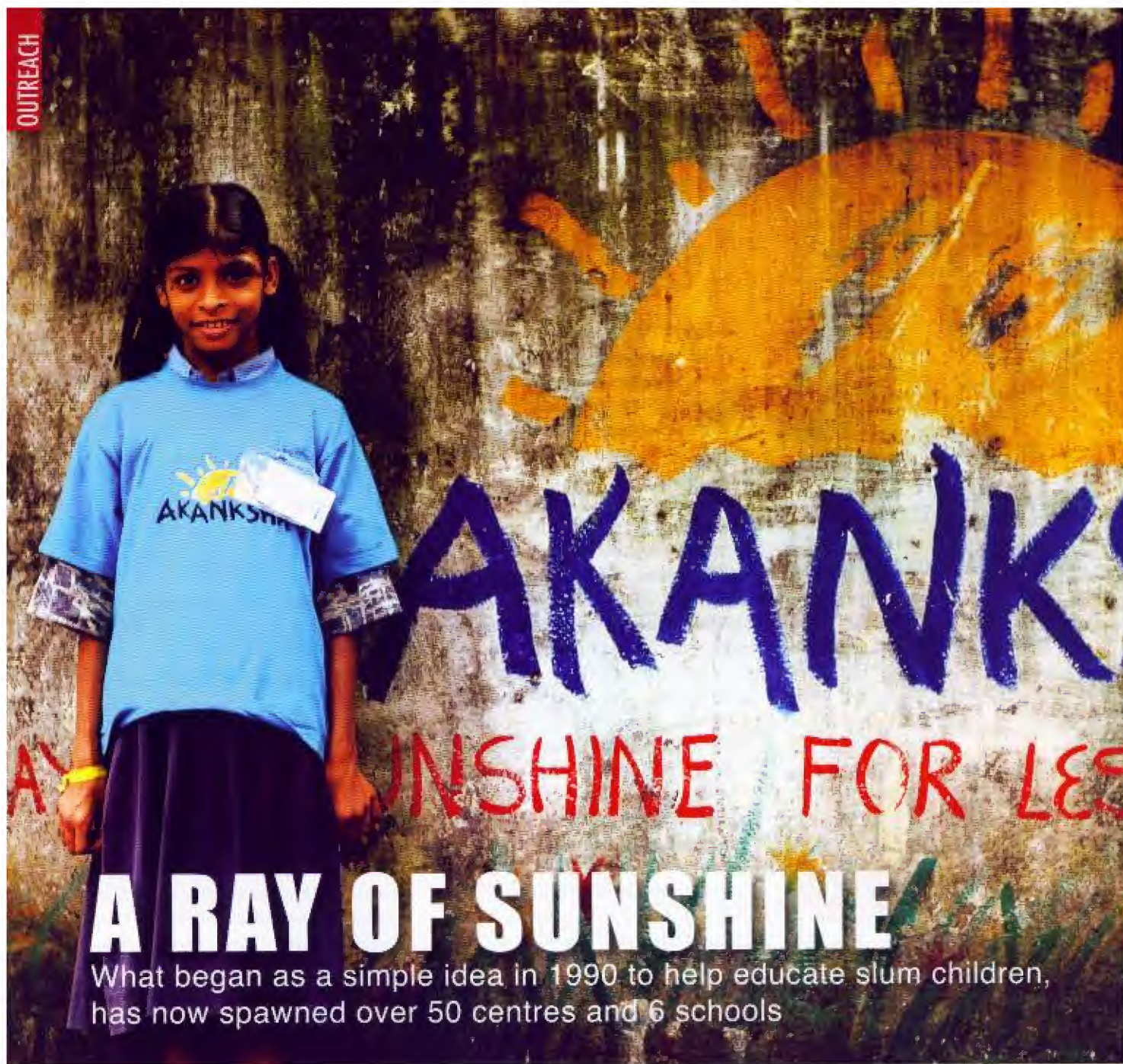
Another thing I believe is that you cannot educate children successfully unless you are in partnership with the parents. Parents are such a fabulous resource. You can't see parents as irritants. I often refer to it (parent-school association) as a marriage. When you put your child in a school, you spend 14 years with that institution. Like in any partnership, it's a roller-coaster ride. So commit to it.

R: So what gives you hope now?

AA: Teachers give me hope when I see the courage with which they've taken on the task of learning to teach in a new way. The kids give me hope. They are so wide-eyed and embracing of what's new and so discerning of what doesn't work. When I see children happily laughing and walking into school and bouncing when they leave and then bouncing back the next day, I think, 'Great, that's happiness!' I wonder if CEOs can ever feel like that. ■



ARUNA CHIDAMBARAM is a filmmaker and development communication. Has taken it upon herself to undo the all-pervasive 'dumbing down' brought in by the idiot box. Conducts creative expression workshops for youngsters and is fiercely empathetic with those who have learning struggles. You can reach her at aruna.chidambaram@gmail.com



A RAY OF SUNSHINE

What began as a simple idea in 1990 to help educate slum children, has now spawned over 50 centres and 6 schools

Text: Raashmi Chakravarti
Photos: Courtesy Akanksha

Founded by Shaheen Mistri, the Akanksha Foundation is a non-profit organization that works primarily in the field of education, addressing supplemental education through the Akanksha centre model and the school model for formal education.

The Akanksha Foundation was initiated in 1990, and was registered as a charitable society and trust in 1991. From an organization run completely through voluntary efforts, Akanksha has grown to a professional institution with full-time and part-time staff, supported by several hundred volunteers.



EDUCATION IN INDIA - UNEQUAL DIVIDE

18 year old Shaheen Mistri came to Mumbai on a holiday but decided to stay back to make an impact. Shaheen realized through her interaction with slum children that they were doubly disadvantaged by not learning English, the preferred language of the job market, and because they received little more than a third-rate education – the bare basics – from government-run schools. Visits to municipal schools

revealed leaking roofs, no power, a dearth of working latrines, desks without chairs, no laboratories, absent teachers, a low teacher-student ratio and no enrollment process to assure that every child attends school.

This system, Shaheen inferred, produces more dropouts than graduates and spawns more criminals than honest, hardworking citizens. Typically, students are pushed forward through the fourth grade without assessing what they are learning. When exams are introduced in the fifth grade many children fail and eventually drop out. Altogether, nearly half of enrolled students drop out during their first five years.

Indian law fails to guarantee the quality of government schools' infrastructure or teaching. As a result, the educational system creates a class system that segregates those who can afford to get a private, English-language education from those who cannot. Shaheen founded Akanksha with a vision to bridge this educational inequity.

AKANKSHA CENTRES

Akanksha believes that a strong afterschool model can effectively fill many of the gaps in the school system. Founded on the principle of maximizing existing resources, centres are run in under-utilized buildings and spaces for 2 1/2 hours a day, five days a week for a group of 60 children. Each centre is staffed with professional teachers trained in imparting the Akanksha curriculum and methodology, assisted by volunteers and social workers.

Akanksha has developed a 10 level curriculum that uses innovative teaching methodology to teach English, Math and Values. The first 7 levels focus on our goals of a Strong Educational Foundation, Good Time and Self-esteem and Values. The last

3 levels focus on our goal of Preparation for a Job. At the top level, each child has an individual mentor. The mentors could be individuals or companies. Akanksha wants their children to grow up to be good citizen and each of them to leave with a job in hand. The structured, safe centre environment provides children with the security necessary to gain self-confidence and kindles their desire to change their lives. Most importantly, the centre experience empowers them to deliver on their dreams.

AKANKSHA PROGRAMS

Students participate in a range of extra-curricular activities including Art, Sports, Drama, Dance and Computer Training. Older Students have access to the Empowerment program as well as one-on-one sessions every week with a mentor who serves as a guide and confidante. The Medical program gives children and their families access to doctors as well as routine check-ups and treatment. The 'Learning to Lead' and 'Social Leadership' programs allow children to fulfil their personal and social objectives and become agents of change themselves. The Alumni Club keeps the graduates connected to the organization and to each other so that they can utilize the Akanksha network in their future endeavors.

AKANKSHA IMPACT

As of August 2009, Akanksha serves 2,500 children in the Akanksha centers and 1,030 children in the Akanksha schools in Mumbai and Pune. There are 57 centers and 6 schools between the two cities. The staff strength is approximately 90 people, with over 150 teachers and 400 volunteers.

Akanksha's impact in centres is captured through a Model Centre Audit process that tracks student learning, self-esteem and values,

quality of time, teacher performance, student attendance, drop-out rate, parents' meeting attendance and volunteer involvement. In Akanksha schools, external tests are used from Std. 3 onwards to track students' scholastic performance. In addition, the schools are measured on several parameters similar to the Centre Audit process.

Over the span of its existence, the organization has many alumni success stories. Akanksha graduates are encouraged to explore and discover their unique path to success on completion of the program. By 2008, around 70% of Akanksha students had successfully completed their Std. 10 exam, and over 80% of the alumni were in college or employed or doing both – a higher percentage than their peers from their communities and schools. ■

THE TYPICAL PROFILE OF A CHILD WHO ENROLLS IN AN AKANKSHA CENTER:

- Is one of many siblings
- Lives in a small hut or in tenementary quarters
- Witnesses regular demonstration of harshness home
- Does not have access to adequate electricity or running water
- Does not have a balanced diet or other things
- Does avoid dirt, slum/house pollution
- Is exposed to high levels of disease and infection
- Is exposed to drugs, alcoholism, smoking and domestic abuse
- Has no physical or emotional security
- Is often physically or verbally abused by family or members of the community
- Often has low self-esteem
- Usually has uneducated parents
- Family income is inadequate to support needs
- Parents don't have long-term stable jobs
- Has little time to be a child because of housework and looking after siblings
- Is often home without adult supervision

INTERVIEW

Shaheen Mistri, founder, CEO and 'Top Did!' of the Akanksha Foundation, a non-profit organization with a mission to impact the lives of less privileged children, enabling them to maximize their potential and change their lives.



Tell us about your early education in formative years.

I started my education in Beirut, in Lebanon. I was in a French nursery school. From there we moved to Greece, so there, I was in a British school system and then, in Indonesia, I was in an international school and then in America I was first in a republic school and then in a private school. So, I've sort of seen a gamut of educational systems except for the Indian school system. I never studied in an Indian school. I did a year of university in the US at the US Tufts University in Boston and then came back to India.

What did you study at Tufts University?

I was in my first year undergrad. I did a wide range of things there. I came back to India in my second year, joined St. Xavier's College (Mumbai), did sociology with a specialization in education and then went abroad and did a Masters in Education from Manchester University in the UK.

Did the Masters in Education from Manchester help you with your work at Akanksha?

It was not a traditional teaching degree. It was a degree in educational project planning in developing countries. Most of the people who took the course with me were practitioners in the field for several years, so it was really interesting to get their insights. What it allowed me to do was to develop this idea of using college

students to improve the educational system. That was to some extent helpful, but I really feel that the vast amount of things I've learnt is from actually doing stuff, not so much from formal education.

Considering you hadn't seen much of India earlier, did you find it difficult to get into an Indian mindset?

Yes. I think there are some things that I loved about the Indian mindset and some that drove me crazy. Overtime as you learn the environment you learn to operate within it. Having this deep love for India and having the exposure abroad has helped get the best out of me.

Were you inspired by certain people? Have any of your own teachers influenced you?

Yes. One of the best things was being able to live in all different parts of the world and meet all these different people. I'd moved around so much, it made me really adaptable. It certainly made an impact on me to interact with a wide range of people and draw the best from them. There are a couple of teachers that just stand out, who I think have been key influencers.

Do you have a mentor or somebody who guided you initially?

There were so many mentors it's hard for me to isolate one or two. In the early days there was a colonel who really helped me a lot in terms of understanding the system in India. Then, through many years at

Akanksha, several of our board members have played key mentoring roles in helping me understand structure and organization building. Several of the kids have been huge mentors to me in terms of understanding what the challenges of their lives are.

Why did you choose to work in the non-profit sector over other commercially viable options?

Honestly, it was a much easier decision for me because I did have the backing of my family and never sort of wanted for anything myself in my life. For me money is important but to an extent. It is not the driving force. Having a mission in life was important to me. I just feel so privileged that I'm able to do what I really feel passionate about. I feel very very excited about what I do and feel lucky to do it.

Do you think it was easier for you to make this choice since you were financially secure?

Definitely! Initially my family had questions, but having said that, I was lucky in terms of financial and moral support.

How involved is your family with Akanksha?

I think they have become increasingly involved over the years in terms of their buying and understanding of the idea from the initial "why are you doing this?" They've certainly been really supportive.

Tell us about your family.

I've been married and divorced. My elder daughter is nine and my younger one who is adopted is four. The elder one has begun to understand a bit about Akanksha and has shown interest. My younger one is still too small.



Have you ever felt that your personal life has taken a backseat?

I think of my life as one thing. I don't really have a personal-professional divide. I feel the balance is what you make it. I don't feel bad if I have to be with my kids in the middle of a work day or if I have to work on a Sunday.

What were the biggest challenges you faced when you started out?

One was just having people trust that I knew what I was doing because I was 18 and didn't speak even a word of Hindi. The second was the challenge of the operations of getting it set up - finding spaces to teach, finding volunteers, getting them to make a commitment, getting kids to come, getting kids and their parents to make a commitment...

How do you find the right kind of people for staff positions?

When we started for the first 4 years there were no hired people at all, everyone was a volunteer. As we got bigger we realized we needed teachers. So the first people we hired were teachers. We believed a lot in the beginning that the qualifications were less important and the passion and commitment to kids was more important. We'd look for that more.

How do you reach out to children and convince them to join an Akanksha center?

Now we have a whole well established social work team. We have a presence in all the communities we work in. When we are starting new centers it is just word of mouth and we always have a greater demand that we're able to supply. In a new community, again, the social workers will go and do a recce of the area, meet people in that area and start spreading the word in that community.

Has Akanksha grown at a steady pace or do you think things accelerated at a certain point?

It was very slow in the first few years. In the early days the acceleration point was when we brought in paid staff and not rely solely on volunteers. We were able to have more people and start more centers. From there it steadily grew.

Did you hire consultants for the expansions and other plans?

We've worked a lot with McKinsey on a pro bono basis for many years. We keep going back to them for different things.

SHAHEEN MISTRI: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Shaheen was born in Mumbai but has lived in 13 different countries as her father worked for a multinational company. At 18, she visited Mumbai on a holiday but decided to stay back, determined to do something about the inequality she saw in the slums. While studying in Mumbai, she simultaneously worked for a newspaper which took her to parks and corners of diversity. Her visit to Mumbai's slums only made the wide gap between the rich and poor very apparent. Shaheen, who only spoke English, befriended a Hindi-speaking girl from the slums so that each of them could learn a new language. Her friendship with this girl gave her deeper insights into the lives and problems of the underprivileged. Then, children from nearby slums would hear their conversations and gradually, their sessions translated into regular evening classes. This was the turning point for Shaheen's realization as to how powerful education could be for slum children. She was determined to alternate these children from their current environment to a different, meaningful life.

Shaheen approached her friends to help with initial efforts to provide innovative and adequate educational opportunities for these children. She scoured around for space for her first center but was refused by nineteen school principals. When she had almost given up, the Holy Convent School came as a saving place and agreed to house her. In 1990, Shaheen started the first learning center, enlisting college friends as her first group of volunteers and inspiring tiny children.



Over the past 18 years, the organization has expanded from 15 children in one center to over 3,500 children across Mumbai and Pune. Shaheen is an Ashoka Fellow (2003), a Global Leader for Tomorrow at the World Economic Forum (2007), an Asia Society 35 Leader (2006) and serves on the boards of Bhavnagar, The Thomas Social Initiatives Foundation and is an advisor to the Tanika Roy Foundation. She has been working on the issue of Teach For India since 2007 and serves as its CEO and also one of its founding Board Members. Today, Shaheen lives with her 2 children in Mumbai and continues to work towards her dream of equal education for all children.

Akanksha helps the children not just in their academics but also their personal issues. Is it a difficult call?

Yes. It is incredibly difficult! I don't think there's any other way though. I think the biggest struggle our teachers have is where to draw the line. How much do you do and how much do you not do? How do you ensure that dependency doesn't set in and still make sure you're doing enough for the kids? I don't know if there are any answers. It's a question of constantly evolving that balance. I've seen without exception that the teachers that are really successful are the ones that are deeply connected outside the classroom. Our kids are complicated and the gaps are too huge to think of their needs as being only academic.

As the kids grow older, don't their parents sometimes want them to lend a hand in earning money instead of spending time at an Akanksha center?

We start investing in the parents early on. We give out these messages regularly. They understand overtime and do what they can to make their kids go to school.

Has your outlook on education for the underprivileged changed over the years?

Most definitely! My biggest learning is that you have to have incredibly high expectations from these kids and not think of them as different. The minute all the real problems in their lives become excuses you are

dead! They will never achieve anything. You need to be able to understand that some of the kids are getting abused at home, the schools are bad, health is an issue, etc. but these things can be overcome. We need to internalize the idea that every single child can learn at high levels and that we must set the highest expectations from them.

Your website states that everyone's business card at Akanksha says 'didi' or 'bhaiya', does yours too?

Yes. The thinking behind that was to make sure that we have a culture where as we grew, had a wider set of responsibilities, whether we are the CFO or COO, we still are a Didi/bhaiya to the child.

How involved are you in the day-to-day functioning of the Akanksha centers?

Not at all now. Actually, my fulltime job has shifted from Akanksha to Teach for India a year ago. The teams handling Akanksha are terrific. They manage it independently. I'm just there if they need to bounce off an idea or a little bit on the strategy or funding side. But apart from that, I've made myself redundant!

Right now, I spend my time in managing the team for Teach for India and all the different verticals under it. My average day can include anything from designing marketing material, updating the website, recruiting people, meeting funders, thinking about improving the governance, to observing classrooms and training teams.

The Teach for India program took off in classrooms in June this year. How is that shaping up?

It's amazing! You really feel like a movement has started when you hear these 87 people all excited about the program, how hard they're working



and how smart they are. In general they are doing well. They require a lot of support and training which we are giving them. I think it has gone a lot better than we thought it would. We had 200 applications and we sifted that with a 3 step process.

This year we've already started the application process for our next cohorts, which are about 150 people. So we have a one year lead time to select and recruit them. This year our job is really difficult. We're supporting the first cohorts and at the same time starting the next ones.

Have municipal schools been open to the Teach for India program?

The municipal schools in Pune have been largely open to this, so we're placed in a lot of Pune schools. In Mumbai we're placed in low income private schools. We're placed in some municipal schools where some NGO has a presence so permissions have been worked out. We're interested in schools that see a value in having the fellows.

Why have you chosen Pune and Mumbai for your projects?

I was in Mumbai so Akanksha started in Mumbai. Pune happened because Anu Aga (Thermax), who is one of

our board members now, is based in Pune and was very keen to get things started there. She's been our greatest champion in Pune. We took the Akanksha model to Pune at her behest. Now she's also on the Teach for India board and is a huge support for Teach for India as well. Teach for India will grow very soon into a national movement. The next 2 years we will be in Mumbai and Pune so

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that we make our foundation strong. The year after that, we'll add Delhi and thereafter, the plan is to roll out in eight cities and their surrounding areas.

Over the years, what one thing has been a source of constant inspiration?

I know it is the most overused thing, but the idea of personal transformation, 'Be the change' inspired by Gandhiji, for me, is probably the single biggest thing I try to live by. Not that there are many disconnects in

my own life but just the idea that you need to continue to work on yourself. You need to be very human. Listen to what your inner voice is trying to say to you. You can't really change anything outside. The only thing you can change is yourself. Use your energy on changing yourself and that tends to have more of a ripple effect that trying to change everybody around you. That, for me, has been a very powerful thought.

It's been 19 years since you started Akanksha. Knowing well that there is no huge monetary gain for your efforts, how have you been able to fuel your vision so incessantly?

I feel it's so easy to be motivated here. I get this question a lot and I don't truly understand it. I can understand you saying that to someone who works in an investment bank "How can money truly motivate you for so many years?" Whereas here, every single day you are seeing these little miracles happen - the way the kids are learning, the way the teachers are developing...and I think for all of us to be able to work for something that is so important. Whether we achieve what we've set out for in this lifetime or five lifetimes to come, the idea that we are working towards making the world a better place is hugely motivational to all of us. The biggest motivation comes from seeing the kids learn. ■



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AN OBSERVER OF PEOPLE AND EVENTS, A LEARNER FOR LIFE

Tushar Tamhane has been a researcher, a science teacher and a teacher trainer. Over and above all, he has been a lifelong believer in hands-on learning.

TEXT: MINDFIELDS TEAM | PHOTOS COURTESY: TUSHAR TAMHANE

Where did you grow up and do your schooling?

I did my early schooling in a Hindi medium school in Nepanagar, Madhya Pradesh. It was a school managed and run by the Newsprint factory for the employees' children. I moved to Nagpur and repeated Grade 9 because I shifted to an English medium school. Completed my graduation, post-graduation and research from Nagpur University.

What is your family background like?

My paternal grandfather was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave and was the first appointed teacher at Swavlambi Vidyalaya at Wardha. My father did his B.Tech in Chemical Engineering from IIT, Nagpur, and worked (retired from) Nepa Limited, Nepanagar. My

mother did her B.A. in Music from Agra University and was a good vocal singer.

Why did you decide to teach? How did your family view your career choice?

My foray into teaching was a coincidence. In 1985, the newly started Kendriya Vidyalaya had a vacancy of PGT (Physics). I ended up enjoying a two-month stint teaching children of Grades 9 and 10 while I was awaiting my M.Sc. results.

The Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha (BJVJ) in Bhopal, 1987, was a turning point for me. NGOs from around the country came together on a single platform and I had a chance to interact with motivated activists and educators like Arvind Gupta, Arvind Gupte and Vinod Raina.

In 1988, I participated in the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP) which was a mind-blowing revelation as to one's own learning, and the sheer depth and involvement of dedicated resource people. This interaction helped me make the decision to take the plunge. I discontinued the research work I was involved with, and opted for an ad-hoc teaching position at Kendriya Vidyalaya, Kamptee, Nagpur.

People at home have had many questions about my crazy decision but I assume they relented over the years.

Major influences in the field of education...

The network of resource people of EKLAVYA, Krishnamurti Schools, Arvind Gupta, Late Vishnu

Chinchalkar (Guruji) and, of course, the vibrant children who challenge every idea that is put before them until it satisfies their curiosity!

Your approach to introducing children to the subject you love...

There have been some concepts which, by their very nature, not easy to teach. Regular interaction with pioneers and stalwarts helped find answers. Basically, I am a researcher by nature. I enjoy going into the depth of challenging questions raised by children. The process continues and now it is applied with learners of all ages from 2 years to 55 years.

Having been a naughty child myself, I am fascinated by things where one has to use one's hands, think creatively, tinker with things and create something. The basic attempt has always been to engage the learners and self. In the process, some of my passion for the subject rubs off a little – I hope.

Obstacles you have faced in your career, and how you overcame them...

Opportunity to experiment and innovate with syllabus/ curriculum/ concept is fundamental to me. It is of utmost importance. And so, wherever it was allowed (and for however long it was allowed), I continued to work in that place.

The response of children has been mostly encouraging, and it allowed me to sustain my passion. My partner was also in the same profession, and that was a big help in making choices. Many issues would be continuously discussed, and I could get a different perspective. This only strengthened my desire to pursue a lifelong journey in school facilitation.

What was it like to make the transition from being a teacher to being a mentor to teachers?

All through my career in education, I think that mentoring other colleagues was something that was happening very unconsciously. A long-standing



Tamhane (third from left), advocates learning through doing. Previous Page: Tamhane in a teacher training session.

interest in art, craft, games, and hands-on activities has helped immensely in mentoring teachers. I am able to provide specific things to different people.

The role demands certain things, and age and experience bring with them conviction and confidence. In the end, you can only share your limited anecdotes with the group. From there onwards, with patience and perseverance, they have to take risks on their own.

What does your work at Career Launcher entail?

Academic facilitation, planning for in-service orientation of teachers, upholding the ideals of meaningful schooling, visiting schools for on-site facilitation, and specific interactions and workshops with school leaders, coordinators, teachers, parents.

All these things require continuous research. One has to identify problem areas, prioritize, suggest context-specific solutions, think of creative alternatives to doing something, generate resources using the ever expanding internet and technology, and network with people who have done pioneering work in school education in India.

Other interests and hobbies...

Reading old newspapers and magazines and extracting valuable

articles for myself and others. My job happens to also be my passion and I feel lucky that I do not have to 'work' at all – I get paid for pursuing my hobby.

Some recommendations from your bookshelf...

- *Life at School* by Meenakshi Thapan
- *Jashn-e-Talim* by Sushil Joshi
- *Meri Kahani* - Flavia Agnes
- *Social Implications of Schooling* by Avijit Pathak

A good teacher must be...

An observer of nature, people, events – and a learner for life. A good teacher is like a child within and is not scared of committing mistakes and learning from them.

"You teach what you know but communicate who you are".

If not an educator, what ...

Probably a researcher in science? Or a populariser of Science and Mathematics? I don't really know. I have always tried to live in the present, and respond to situations positively by accepting the challenge! ■



The Global.Me Project

The Global.Me project is an initiative of the Finnish Education Ministry. Volunteer-teachers from around the world hold workshop-style sessions to help students get familiar with global issues, increase tolerance, gain international experience and be exposed to alternative learning methods. Pooja Nayak shares the experience.

Text and Photos: Pooja Nayak

It wasn't an ordinary February day in the Jyväskylä district of central Finland. The sun shone bright even as the thermometer recorded a nonchalant minus seven degrees C; reason enough to jolt even the shyest of Finns to bonhomie. Somewhere in Jämsä, a Ford shuddered to a stop, a prayer of gratitude was mumbled, and an Indian, a Romanian and an Uzbeki made their way to class.

My first day as the teacher at Jämsä High School, better known as Jamsan Lukio, began nervously. After steering my way carefully

through sixty kilometers of slippery snowed-on roads and an unfamiliar right-hand drive, I was gathering myself to teach a class of high school students. Eleven other people across Finland - from China, Switzerland, Cameroon, U.S, Colombia, Uzbekistan, Portugal, Latvia and Vietnam - were possibly nervously preparing for their roles too.

We were a part of a global education project aimed at Finnish high school students. We all lacked two prerequisites in common - education-related experience and a degree in

teaching - both imperative, if one wants to teach high school in Finland. We did have two advantages though. One was that we were not much older than our students. Secondly, we didn't have preconceived notions about teaching. We were determined to ensure a fun learning experience.

My mind swirled with visions as the ice crunched beneath my feet; those of gum-chewing students staring menacingly at me, of students bored out of their wits, drool dribbling down desks. How does one engage fifteen teenagers

for three whole hours at a stretch and yet make sure their energy levels remain high? I understood now what my college lecturers must have contended with. Back then, classrooms had seemed like chambers where we were kept against our will, only to be saved by the peal of the bell at the end of class.

THE GLOBALME '09 PROJECT

Running for the third year in succession, the Global.Me project is an initiative of the Finnish Education Ministry in partnership with AIESEC, Finland, a student-run organization. The idea is to familiarize students with global issues, increase tolerance, gain international exposure and, more importantly, experience alternative learning methods.

Working in groups of three, we took a three-hour session once a week in five schools. The subjects were as diverse as 'Environment and Sustainability', 'Religion', 'Geopolitics', 'Globalization and Media', 'Consumerism', 'Intercultural Communication' and 'Refugees and Human Rights'. The workshop-style sessions were interesting to plan, because each of us brought our own sensibilities and ideas; at times outrageous but relevant. Perhaps, this is what most attracted me to the project.

Six months into an indefinite 'break' from working in a broadcast channel, I was drifting and took great pleasure in it. Some bit of travel, some making of knives and palm leaf baskets, some bit of rice planting, and learning to make good mulch beds for cucumbers and trellises for the beans. Away from the need to constantly mark achievement in terms of society-accepted goals and rewards, but exponential in terms of my learning curve.



Classroom discussion in progress

The project was a combination of a number of my concerns - ample freedom and creativity, knowledge of global issues, the compelling need to get out of my comfort zone, to experiment with things I'd never done before, and of course, the chance to experience a new country, a new continent, first-hand without worrying about the pocket.

Meeting my colleagues (who were business graduates, history majors, Russian linguists, anthropologists) in class and watching the way the Finnish students responded to them, reinforced my view that there had to be something very wrong with how we blinkered along, restricting ourselves to a niche because 'otherwise we'd be just like everyone else', comfortably escaping the irony of it all. Perhaps, it is a bit foolish to wonder how many nonsense verses, clay sculptures, natural engineering affinities and canvases the world will never be privy to.

The content of the teaching sessions (with a brief listing of topics to cover) was entrusted entirely to us. Role play, crossword puzzles, planning and presenting spot projects, debates, quizzes - there was

no impinging on our creativity. Our group decided to follow an informal rule: any information that we shared was to be followed up by a relevant practical activity. For instance, in a Geopolitics session, we discussed the enormous budgetary allocations dedicated to military spending in different countries across the world. The students were then asked to play 'Finance Ministers' and allot a sum of thousand Euros in any way they liked. While there were some clichés like education and welfare, the popular causes seemed to be promotion of cross-country skiing (a well-liked but neglected sport at the high school level) and making product packaging renewable.

To keep the energy levels high, we interspersed activities with an irreverent game or two, a new one every single time. We played our own versions of musical chairs, got tangled up, literally, in the most complex knots, drew pictures on backs and once, even tore about madly in a 'chase-me' thriller outdoors in the school parking lot. After the initial skepticism about the silliness of it all, it became one of the most eagerly awaited breaks, helping us bond, rib each other and enjoy everything with good humour.



Pooja Nayak (extreme right) hangs out with the Finnish Students

THE FIRST STEPS

Our first class was 'Intercultural Communication'. Apt, considering we would be introducing ourselves for the first time. We'd spent the weekend planning the content carefully and were ready to test it. We began by taking fifteen minutes playing a memory game, getting to know each other. Apart from remembering their names clearly today, I know Vivii likes visual rock music, Anne adores animals and Paulina absolutely loves pizzas! We pushed the desks to the back and created a semi-circle with the chairs, a practice we followed in every class thereafter. Without desks to create barriers (physical and otherwise) and students within an arm's distance of each other, the class becomes an intimate space, with no intimidating barriers of 'them' and 'us'. It suddenly seems more conducive to laughter, anecdotes and stories, something like being a part of an interactive play. We did put up a decent enough show.

Introducing countries in a foreign classroom is always a bit tricky because there is a context that is entirely different (mostly perpetuated by the popular media).

It seems too easy to merely recount the wonders of the Taj Mahal and get away with it. Therefore, a good way to begin is by understanding what they might already know. India merited cows, elephants, 'red dots' (bindis), lots of people, Bollywood, black hair and funny accent (contributed by a 'The Simpsons' fan). Romania merited Count Dracula, the Black Sea and gypsies. Uzbekistan was so exotic in that country of five-and-a-half million people, that most struggled to come up with anything at all. A brave attempt was made by the class' self-confessed geography geek, who drew a loopy groundnut-shaped mass saying he knew "it looked like this on the map". He was not too far off the mark.

PEELING THE ONION

We'd planned to discuss stereotypes, prejudices and racism, and the mention of 'gypsies' gave us our non-contrived opening. To me, 'gypsies' conjures up vivid images of swirling rainbow skirts, dark-skinned men and dusky women dripping of mystique, rambling caravans on a road to nowhere, smoky campfires and lively music. In Finland though, 'gypsies' takes on an altogether different connotation,

hinting at unscrupulous, penny pinchers who would pull a fast one if they could. What was once a tribe of people in Romania came to be a collective noun for all its people. How did we come to accept this idea of a particular group? Were we influenced by what was said by people around us or the media? How much? Did we personally know any Romanians? The gentle questioning helped slowly peel at layers.

We indulged in a bit of role play too, dividing our students into random groups, enacting the popular stereotypes in their country. The catch: they couldn't talk as they acted. No words, only gestures were allowed. The students were apprehensive initially; after all, to act in front of a class at this age was unthinkable! But after a few false starts, Mätti and his group swaggered, banged an invisible vodka mug on the class table, wiped mouths on sleeves, gestured violently and grimaced at classmates. "Russians!" came the immediate chorus.

ADAPTING AND UNLEARNING

English is a purely academic language amongst Finns and, though they speak it decently, I had to remind myself to speak slowly, and enunciate clearly. Also, what works in one class, doesn't quite work in another. Most often the content takes its own course, depending on the level of enthusiasm, mood, and our own knowledge and energy levels.

In Mäntän Lukio, where we had a particularly energetic bunch of youngsters, a debate on the pros and cons of globalization went back and forth for a good part of the hour, while in Keuru though the debate was a bit of a damp affair, the students painted an enormous Human Rights tree to life. At Orivesi, numerically our largest class, the

students stumped us with their creativity in creating their own country, complete with a name, rules (or lack of them), exports, imports, policy on refugees, trade relations with one another, but emphasizing they didn't want borders.

While most of these experiences may be familiar to most teachers, to me it was entirely new that the classroom space could be so adaptive and one could learn even without being conscious of it. All through my school, I was read out to from a standard textbook, which I then followed by dutifully mugging up the answers to the questions at the end, which, in turn, I dutifully regurgitated during my tests, often, very scarily, right down to the exact comma.

FINNISH VERSUS INDIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

While the course was about teaching, a lot was also about understanding the different forces at work that inspire students to be the way they are. The students took just a single class to warm up to us completely. They were informal but respectful, confident about expressing thoughts despite not being at ease with their English. It was the same in the regular classes that we sat in on. This has much to do with the way their education system is structured.

For starters, education is completely free, right up to the Masters level. This means that there is no disparity between the schools in the country in terms of resources, technology and infrastructure. Secondly, a group of schools in a geographical area work together under a broad core curriculum and they are free to choose their own methods. There are no uniforms - the students came to class in pink-dyed hair, wore heavy metal chains and Arab scarves as self expression. Teachers and

PISA or the Programme for International Student Assessment takes place once in three years. It tests math, science and reading abilities of 15 year olds across different countries. It is conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, a group funded by 30 countries. Finland not only bagged the top spot but has consistently done well over the years.



students address each other informally and there is no honour-based system where the ones who do really well are pushed to do harder. There is almost no homework and students work on projects which test their learning during class hours itself. There are also exchange students (mostly from China, South Korea and other European countries) who choose to spend a school year studying in Finland, adding some diversity of opinion, perspectives to the sessions.

Perhaps all this reflected on the PISA* (see inset box) test conducted in 2006 where Finland took top

spots when it came to Science and Reading, and the second place in Math and Problem Solving.

At so many levels, I realized how incomplete and ineffectual the system I studied in had been. There never was learning, just the eagerness to test. I was more caught up with making sure I got the answers right, never mind how I got there. Math was a demon, History a tyranny of dates, Biology was tolerable, and Chemistry a maze of formulae.

I could have done well with a year off - to explore without agenda, travel and figure what it was that I wanted to do next instead of operating on autopilot from high school through degrees to my first job - something many Finnish students try out during or after high school. And unlike here, where you will spend a lifetime being interrogated ceaselessly, have people doubt your sanity and worry about explaining a year of experimentation without the aid of a marksheet - the Finns actually encourage the time off.

Perhaps that is what we need - a bit more of creating our own fictitious countries along with agonizing over India's top exports, a bit of play-acting over memorizing chronology, some solving of crossword puzzles and a silly game for when we are just not in the mood - to encourage curious minds and free spirits. ■



Pooja Nayak started off as a broadcast journalist in a mainstream news channel before moving away to teach, travel, farm and make a knife from scratch. Wants to grow her own vegetables soon, learn an Indian musical instrument someday and dreams of bathing elephants with a pall in one hand and a big ole brush in the other. Is currently working on a documentary on the dangers of processed foods. She can be reached at pooja.nayak@gmail.com.



A Million Books for a Billion People



Scientist, educator, toymaker, 'copyleft' lobbyist Arvind Gupta looks at the history – and future of making books freely available to all those who seek.

Text: Arvind Gupta | Illustration: Studio Umbilical

The human species thrives because each generation passes on its lived experiences to the next one. These experiences were carved on rocks, scribbled on clay tablets, written on parchment for the benefit of all. Texts were copied by scribes and kept in depositories. Libraries and archives were known to many civilisations in Egypt, Asia Minor and Greece. These sundry libraries were, however, primarily concerned with the conservation of local traditions and heritage.

The first known universal library, which gathered books from all over the world at one single location, was the great Library at Alexandria. Its genesis lay in the inquisitive Greek mind and in Alexander's conquests. The book booty must have made the library richer.

(Likewise, the British Museum is often described in jest as the 'biggest repository of loot from the Third World'.

Today, we can be one up on the Greeks. We can share more books with each other than ever before. The Library of Congress in the USA is the single largest repository of books in the world with a collection of over 26 million books.

All these books, once digitized, can be put on a small server costing just US\$ 50,000! Imagine, all the world's greatest books 'spinning' away for the benefit of all of humanity! The Boston Public Library, founded in 1826, has the caption FREE FOR ALL inscribed on its door. The MIT is not threatened at all by placing all its course content free online. The most inspiring talks on earth - the TED talks (ted.com) - can all be freely downloaded. Today, we can make available every single book in every single language to every single child on earth. That is something worth dreaming and striving for.

Many pioneers have worked hard to fulfil this dream. In 1971, Michael Hart set up Project Gutenberg (PG) to bridge the knowledge divide and e-share books for free. PG is the world's oldest digital library. Along with its partners and affiliates, PG has managed to upload over 1,00,000 books on the internet. Until 1989, all the books were inputted manually. But with the advent of scanners and OCR (optical character recognition) software, this process has become faster and easier. PG has thousands of passionate volunteers across the globe who proof read the scanned text for free. PG has been a source of deep inspiration for millions across the world. It has used cutting-edge technology, not for personal gains but for public welfare - to allow books to be accessed by millions of people.

In 1993, Microsoft bought out all the world encyclopaedias to set up Encarta - a digital encyclopaedia - to be sold online or by retail. Today, Encarta lies buried. Private greed failed in the face of democratic charity. In 2003, Richard Stallman envisioned a free online encyclopaedia 'for the people, by the people'. The result was the Wikipedia. Like it or loathe it, today Wikipedia is a force to reckon. In August 2009, it reached an impressive milestone of 3 million articles in English with 10 million people collaborating globally! Wikipedia

now contains more than 13 million articles in 271 different languages.

Within a few years, all the books in the world will be digitised. This is for sure. The technology is pretty pedestrian. Big players like Google see big money and are perfecting a micro-payment system where people pay small sums to download a page or a chapter. Only one question will remain: Who will control it all? It can turn out to be a win-win situation, just like the cell phones. Massive volumes will ensure that companies can still make profits while people can benefit by having to pay a lot less than if they were to buy the books.

In 2005, India celebrated the 125th birth anniversary of its greatest writer - Premchand. As a child I had read all his stories. Idgah - the story of a poor boy Hamid who goes hungry but buys a 'chimta' for his grandmother - still brings tears to my eyes. I thought it would be worth checking out this story on the

internet. I couldn't find it anywhere and felt crestfallen. So I typed it out in Hindi, English and Marathi and uploaded it on my website. This was my humble tribute to Premchand. Much has changed. Four years later, it is heartening to see 300 odd stories by Premchand on the site <http://munshi-premchand.blogspot.com>

There are no public libraries in India. Where do our teachers and learners find good books? This prompted me to set up a website

(<http://arvindguptatoys.com>). A hundred thousand passionate books on education, environment and peace get downloaded from my website every month.

For teachers in small towns with no internet, I have compiled a CD - Learner's Library. It contains 900 wonderful books plus 3000 photographic instructions to make low-cost science models. All this wonderful stuff for less than ten rupees! This CD has been shared freely with over 3000 schools. The Learner's Library is circulating freely in South Africa, Nepal, Pakistan, Ghana and a few other countries. Two months, back an organisation in Gujarat made 1000 copies of the Learner's Library and gifted them to schools.

Every human being has a deep desire to contribute meaningfully to society. This desire to share is deeply encoded in human nature. Given this, it is only a matter of time before we have books being available for free, accessible to anyone who seeks knowledge. I wait eagerly, to see that day. ■

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My Life is My Message

P. Gopinath Nair, Chairman of the Kerala Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi, was deeply inspired by Gandhiji's conviction that the foundations of an independent India must be based on empowered villages.

Text and Photos: Shagufta Bhardwaj

Temple bells rouse Gopinath Nair every morning at the crack of dawn. Then the sound of the azaan drifts through his traditional Tharavada home in Netinkara, near Thiruvananthapuram. His wife already in the kitchen calls aloud for coffee. The two start yet another quiet day with one reading the Hindu and the other a Malayalam Daily. By the time the newspapers are exchanged, the guests come calling, everyone from friends and neighbors to social activists and the members of local associations. By 9:30 a.m. Mr. Nair leaves for his office at Kerala Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi (the Nidhi) in Thiruvananthapuram, 45 minutes away. Mr. Nair, who is 88, has served as chairman of the Nidhi for years. "Some days at work are more challenging than others," Mr. Nair told me. "But every day is new for me."

When Gandhiji was assassinated in January 1948, Gopinath Nair was still at Shantiniketan. The tragic moment inspired profound reflection on how he should spend his life.

Marching with fellow protesters in Calcutta (Kolkata) during pre-independent India



The desk in Mr. Nair's office captures his dynamic personality. It's piled high with newspapers in Malayalam and English, official documents, letters, meticulously labeled files, and an assortment of books, yet the table still appears organized. In one of the table's corners sit a miniature charkha and a photograph of Gandhiji, the man to whom Mr. Nair has dedicated his life. "My life is my message," he quotes for me. "How many people in the world can say that?"

Born in 1921 in Netinkara, Kerala, Gopinath Nair spent his childhood in the lap of nature. "The Netinkara River is believed to have miraculous powers. I grew up hearing that people find ghee [clarified butter] deposits on the river banks. But as our negative karma grows the ghee deposits are depleting," he laughs. Growing up in the years when the non-cooperation movement was at its peak, Gopinath was an extraordinary student who could study and appreciate the Upanishads at the age of 13. His father, who was a lawyer, expected him to follow a similar career path. But Gopinath's life changed in 1933 when Gandhiji visited Kerala. His first memory of Gandhiji is of the spritely old man

navigating with agility through the eager crowds that had lined up to see him. "Seeing him running through the crowds to keep his time commitments, I realized the importance of discipline and the value of time," Mr. Nair told me. "He was indeed an extraordinary man."

In 1938 Mr. Nair joined the Maharaja College for Science in Trivandrum. During college he decided to immerse himself in the struggle for freedom. Dropping a midterm year at college, he joined the Congress and Quit India Movement in 1942, when most of the established leaders had been arrested. He and other students of the Maharaja College protested against the Raja of Travancore, a supporter of the British. Their group was jailed for sedition but released after a couple of days of imprisonment. The incident made Mr. Nair popular in his college's Congress Youth Wing and he recognized his ability to organize. But at this time Mr. Nair lost his father; another kind of responsibility fell on his shoulders. While remaining active in student and youth affairs, he still studied enough to earn his Bachelor of Science in 1943. He worked from 1943-46 for the student movement and with Congress the interim

government, but also applied for a scholarship to study at Vishwa Bharti University (Shantiniketan). "During the time when 'Direct Action' was called [by Jinnah to push for Partition], I went to Shantiniketan looking for *shanti* (Peace)," he said with a smile. "But as soon as I reached Bengal I saw dead bodies at the railway station. My introduction to Bengal was rather sad. Gandhiji's presence was a big stabilizing factor there. We take our inspiration from events in history like Naukhal, a predominantly Muslim area where Gandhiji was present during the independence hour. He urged people to give up arms and spent his time at a Muslim house. Gandhiji was deeply disturbed by the riots that broke out."

At the time of independence, Mr. Nair was in Shantiniketan. Even though it was a time of celebration, he remembers having mixed feelings about the achievement even then. In September 1947, Gandhiji returned back to Calcutta. Mr. Nair went with a group of students from Shantiniketan to meet him. They could not believe their luck when their request to speak with him personally was accepted. Gandhiji was distraught by the violence around him. He asked the students

if they were Hindus or Muslims, but then replied himself: "You are neither Hindu nor Muslim. You are *Insaan* (humans)."

When Gandhiji was assassinated in January 1948, Mr. Nair was still at Shantiniketan. The tragic moment inspired profound reflection on how he should spend his life. In April, on his way back home to Kerala, he stopped at Gandhiji's Wardha Ashram. There he found the Mahatma's spirit of service still alive. "Gandhiji was and is not a person but a spirit," Mr. Nair discovered. "He was not a human being but an embodiment of a spirit, the spirit of a movement that went beyond the struggle for independence."

The great leader's simple mud hut in Wardha, just as any other in rural India, moved Mr. Nair to work at the grassroots in his home state of Kerala. He was deeply inspired Gandhiji's conviction that the foundations of an independent India must be based on empowered villages. "Many years later, Vinoba Bhave asked me why I decided to quit Shantiniketan as I could have used the opportunity to spread Gandhiji's word by using the university platform. I never regretted my decision. Life has its own way."

In 1950 Gandhi Smarak Nidhi was established as a national organization to preserve and spread Gandhiji's message. "I was amongst the first to join the Nidhi. In Kerala we started encouraging Khadi units and Gram Seva work. Later, as a Tatva Pracharak, we started to spread the essence of his message and his vision. I was in charge of organizing three main study centres at Trivandrum, Ernakulam and Calicut." The Nidhi also organized youth camps and encouraged young people to serve their society. An important part of



Gopinath Nair addressing a gathering in Bengal in the early 1940s

In the aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pak War he worked at the refugee camps for Bangladeshis. He and his colleagues organized youth from Dhaka University living in the camps and encouraged them to volunteer as service workers.

the camps were prayer meetings for peace.

In 1958 Mr. Nair became a member of the All-India Sarva Seva Sangh, a Gandhian service organization of which he would later become President. This role personally exposed him to the challenges of conflict resolution amid communal tension. "In Kerala, there was a constant tension between Christian and Hindu fishermen and we always felt that it was important to solve the problem peacefully. Even though our approach was seen as slow, one has to go to the core to

understand and solve an issue permanently." He focused on building a Shanti Sena, a nonviolent army of peace workers, to resolve communal conflicts.

Over the next two decades Mr. Nair's understanding of peace and nonviolent conflict resolution strengthened. In the aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pak War he worked at the refugee camps for Bangladeshis. He and his Bengali colleagues organized youth from Dhaka University living in the camps and encouraged them to volunteer as service workers. Together they addressed issues like communalism and management of the camps, including basic cleanliness and hygiene. It was a tremendous job that involved massive dedication from both the volunteer trainees and the refugees.

During the 1980s and 90s numerous communal riots broke out in different corners of India. In 1989 the town of Bhagalpur, Bihar, experienced intense violence. Mr. Nair and his team stayed there for six months intensely mobilizing the communities for peace. "It was quite challenging," he remembers. "When people are angry and violence takes its course, only willpower and tremendous strength can bring a return to peace."

Mr. Nair resolved to undertake a peace mission to Punjab during the height of the insurgency there. He remembers that on the day of his departure his relatives and friends were in an especially somber mood at the railway station. "They thought that was probably the last time they were going to see me!"

One of Mr. Nair's biggest victories as a peace builder was in his home state of Kerala. In 2002 and 2003 brutal communal violence tore

through Marad, near Calicut in northern Kerala. Arms were hidden at places of worship and the situation worsened as political parties and other vested interests encouraging the two sides in the conflict. "A violent riot had broken out there and it was a big showdown since no conclusion was being arrived at," he said.

Mr. Nair and his team organized 100 meetings and conducted foot marches, vehicle yatras, and processions in the riot-infested areas. They held intensive workshops on how to preserve peace that were well attended by both Hindus and Muslims. "Another Kranti [revolution] has returned," one newspaper exclaimed about the efforts. Hindu leaders recognized him as the principle negotiator for peace in the area and he helped broker a unanimous decision to stop the violence. "Gandhi's way of peace brokering still works," he told me.

After the violence subsided, he set out to bring back the 950 Muslim families who had been driven from their homes. "Our teams worked at this for long. Our biggest triumph was that we did not charge the state government a single rupee for putting up our men at Calicut [for this work]. When the first batch of Muslims arrived [back at their homes], there were festivities and a happy atmosphere. Peace is something that need not be government-enforced. People understand peace because it is natural to seek it."

"With experience, we have realized that a lot of work can be done with little money and with smaller groups," Mr. Nair told me. Since 2008 he has focused on counteracting local problems in Kerala like alcoholism and environmental degradation by developing small groups of

Mr. Nair's long years of experience as a Gandhian have given him insight into a wide array of social problems. Today he works with numerous different kinds of social organizations to improve the lives of Keralites.

An early picture of Gopinath Nair taken during pre-independent India



proactive citizens. "We are called Mitra Mandal, a group of friends," he said. "We organize meetings about issues that concern us deeply. Now and then some concerned groups of citizens come to me during evenings and we work together on how to mobilize people and address issues like environment and education more effectively."

Mr. Nair's long years of experience as a Gandhian have given him insight into a wide array of social problems. Today he works with numerous different kinds of social organizations to improve the lives of Keralites. "Though disparate, all these programs, be it about prohibition, education, teachers' training, or cleanliness, are

influenced by Gandhi ji's vision."

"I like to work with people," the tireless Gandhian told me. "After my office hours I work with villagers. We are trying to bring together nature clubs for the village youth." Doesn't he ever need rest? "Vinobaji said, 'All this [work] that I do is rest.' I enjoy my work."

Though well into his eighties, Mr. Nair has never stopped focusing on young people in his work. "Young people have to become young first," he told me. "I have realized how people are no longer young these days. They are either looking back to adolescence or busy planning for future. Vinobaji used to say that yuva (the youth) link the old and the future. They should be aware of the challenges that every generation has to face."

I wondered whether youth today might face different challenges than in the India in which he grew up. "Time changes but fundamentals do not. Truth and love are the greatest fundamentals in a life and they apply to any time and age. The challenge is how to apply these fundamentals. It is important to commit three to four years of your life to service and public work and then to go back to cushioned jobs. A balance is important in every way." He reminded me that though the outward crises of a society may change, the moral challenges we face are timeless. "Life is about moving from a lesser Truth to a higher Truth." ■



SHAGUETA BHARGAVA is a cultural historian, advisor and educator. Leads Sunday walks to heritage sites for the India Habitat Centre. Can generally found in the narrowest lanes

leading to the oldest havelis in Delhi.

IN PRAISE OF SLOWNESS



Canadian-born journalist Carl Honoré has written for *The Economist*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Observer*, and the *National Post*, but he is best known for his advocacy of the Slow Movement. He is also author of the internationally best-selling book *In Praise of Slowness*

TED ideas worth
screaming

We bring you the transcript of Honoré's TED talk courtesy www.ted.com

What I'd like to start off with is an observation, which is that if I've learned anything over the last year, it's that the supreme irony of publishing a book about slowness is that you have to go around promoting it really fast. I seem to spend most of my time these days, you know, zipping from city to city, studio to studio, interview to interview, serving up the book in really tiny bite-size chunks. Because everyone these days wants to know how to slow down, but they want to know how to slow down really quickly. So... so I did a spot on CNN the other day where I actually spent more time in makeup than I did talking on air. And I think that— that's not really surprising though, is it? Because that's kind of the world that we -- we live in now, a world stuck in fast-forward.

A world obsessed with speed, with doing everything faster, with cramming more and more into less and less time. Every moment of the day feels like a race against the clock. To borrow a phrase from Carrie Fisher, which is -- is in my bio there, I'll just toss it out again -- "These days even instant gratification takes too long." And if you think about how we try to make things better, what do we do? No, we speed them up, don't we? So we used to dial; now we speed dial. We used to read; now we speed read. We used to walk; now we speed walk. And of course, we used to date and now we speed date. And even things that are by their very nature slow -- we try and speed them up too. So -- So I was in New York recently, and I walked past a gym that had an advertisement in the window for a new course, a new evening course. And it was for, you guessed it, speed yoga. So this -- the perfect solution for time-starved professionals who want to, you know, salute the sun, but only want to give over about 20 minutes to it. I mean, these are sort of the extreme examples, and they're amusing and good to laugh at.

But there's a very serious point, and I think that in the headlong dash of daily life, we often lose sight of the damage that this roadrunner form of living does to us. We're so marinated in the culture of speed that we almost fail to notice the toll it takes on every aspect of our lives. On our health, our diet, our work, our relationships, the environment and our community. And sometimes it takes a -- a wake-up call, doesn't it, to -- to alert us to the fact that we're hurrying through our lives, instead of actually living them; that we're living the fast life, instead of the good life. And I think for many people, that wake-up call takes the form of an illness. You know, a burn-out, or eventually the body says, "I can't take it anymore," and throws in the towel. Or maybe a relationship goes up in smoke because we haven't had the time, or the patience, or the tranquility, to be with the other person, to listen to them.

And my wake-up call came when I started reading bedtime stories to my son, and I found that at the end of day, I would go into his room and I just couldn't slow down -- you know, I'd be speed reading "The Cat In The Hat." I'd be -- you know, I'd be skipping lines here, paragraphs there, sometimes a whole page and of course, my little boy knew the book inside out, so we would quarrel. And what should have been the most relaxing, the most intimate, the most tender moment of the day, when a dad sits down to read to his son, became instead this kind of gladiatorial battle of wills; a clash between his speed and my -- or, my speed and his slowness. And this went on for some time, until I caught myself scanning a newspaper article with time-saving tips for fast people. And one of them made reference to a series of books called "The One-Minute Bedtime Story." And I -- I wince saying those words now, but my first reaction at the time was very different. My first reflex was to say,

"Hallelujah -- what a great idea! This is exactly what I'm looking for to speed

A world obsessed with speed, with doing everything faster, with cramming more and more into less and less time. Every moment of the day feels like a race against the clock.

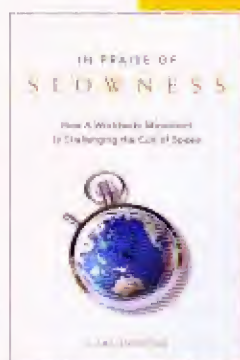
up bedtime even more." But thankfully, a light bulb went on over my head, and my next reaction was very different, and I took a step back, and I thought, "Whoa -- you know, has it really come to this? Am I really in such a hurry that I'm prepared to fob off my son with a sound byte at the end of the day?" And I -- I put away the newspaper -- and I was getting on a plane -- and I sat there, and I did something I hadn't done for a long time -- which is I did nothing. I just thought, and I thought long and hard. And by the time I got off that plane, I'd decided I wanted to do something about it. I wanted to investigate this whole roadrunner culture, and what it was doing to me and to everyone else. And I --

And I had two questions in my head. The first was, how did we get so fast? And the second is, is it possible, or even desirable, to slow down? Now, if you think about how our world got so accelerated, the usual suspects rear their heads. You think of, you know, urbanization, consumerism, the workplace, technology. But I think if you cut through those forces you get to what might be the deeper driver, the nub of the question, which is how we think about time itself. In other cultures, time is cyclical. It's seen as moving in great unhurried circles. It's always renewing and refreshing itself.

Whereas in the West, time is linear. It's a finite resource, it's always draining away. You either use it, or lose it. Time is money, as Benjamin Franklin said. And I think what that -- that does to us psychologically is it -- it creates an equation. Time is scarce, so what do we do? Well -- well, we speed up, don't we? We try and do more and more with less and less time. We turn every moment of every day into a race to the finish line. A finish line, incidentally, that we never reach, but a finish line nonetheless. And I guess that the question is, is it possible to break free from that mindset? And thankfully, the answer is yes, because what I discovered, when I began looking around, that there is a -- a global backlash against this

IN PRAISE OF SLOWNESS: CHALLENGING THE CULT OF SPEED

By Carl Hovind
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In Praise of Slowness is a book by Carl Hovind containing his analysis of the Cult of Speed, which he claims is dominating the societal standard all over the world. He discusses and gives praise to the Slow Movement and the various groups around the world representative of this movement.

culture that tells us that faster is always better, and that busier is best.

Right across the world, people are doing the unthinkable: they're slowing down, and finding that although conventional wisdom tells you that if you slow down, you're roadkill, the opposite turns out to be true. That by slowing down at the right moments, people find that they do everything better. They eat better, they make love better, they exercise better, they work better, they live better. And in this kind of cauldron of moments, and places, and acts of deceleration, lie what a lot of people now refer to as the International Slow Movement.

Now if you'll permit me a small act of hypocrisy, I'll just give you a very quick overview of what -- what's going on inside the Slow Movement. If you think of food, many of you will have heard of the Slow Food movement. Started in Italy, but has spread across the world, and now has 100,000 members in 50 countries. And it's driven by a very simple and sensible message, which is that we get more pleasure and more health from our food when we cultivate, cook and consume it at a reasonable pace. I think also the explosion of the organic farming movement, and the renaissance farmers' markets, is another -- are other illustrations of the fact that people are desperate to get away from eating and cooking and cultivating their food on an industrial timetable. They want to get back to slower rhythms. And out of the Slow Food movement has grown something called the Slow Cities movement, which has started in Italy, but has spread right across Europe and beyond. And in this, towns begin to rethink how they organize the urban landscape, so that people are encouraged to -- to slow down and smell the roses and connect with one another. So they might curb traffic, or put in a park bench, or some green space.

And in some ways, these changes add up to more than the sum of their parts, because I think when a Slow City becomes officially a Slow City, it's kind of like a philosophical declaration. It's saying to the rest of world, and to the people in that town, that we believe that in the 21st century, slowness has a role to play. In medicine, I think a lot of people are

Right across the world, people are doing the unthinkable: they're slowing down, and finding that although conventional wisdom tells you that if you slow down, you're roadkill, the opposite turns out to be true. That by slowing down at the right moments, people find that they do everything better.

deeply disillusioned with the kind of quick-fix mentality you find in conventional medicine. And millions of them around the world are turning to complementary and alternative forms of medicine, which tend to tap into sort of slower, gentler, more holistic forms of healing. Now, obviously the jury is out on many of these complementary therapies, and I personally doubt that the coffee enema will ever, you know, gain mainstream approval. But other treatments such as acupuncture and massage, and even just relaxation, clearly have some kind of benefit. And blue-chip medical colleges everywhere are -- are starting to study these things to find out how they work, and what we might learn from them.

The workplace -- right across much of the world -- North America being a notable exception -- working hours have been coming down. And Europe is an example of that, and people finding that their quality of life improves as they're working less, and also that their hourly productivity goes up. Now, clearly there are problems with the 35-hour work week in France -- too much, too soon, too rigid. But other countries in Europe, notably the Nordic countries, are showing that it's possible to have a kick-ass economy without being a workaholic. And Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland now rank among the top six most competitive nations on earth, and they work the kind of hours that would make the average American weep with envy. And if you go beyond sort of the country level, down at the micro-company level, more and more companies now are realizing that they need to allow their staff either to work fewer hours or just to unplug -- to take a lunch break, or to go sit in a quiet room, to switch off their Blackberrys -- you at the back -- mobile phones, during the work day or on the weekend, so that they have time to recharge and to -- for the brain to slide into that kind of creative mode of thought.

It's not just, though, these days, adults who overwork, though, is it? It's children, too. I'm 37, and my childhood ended in the mid-'80s, and I look at kids now, and I'm just amazed by the way they race around with more homework, more tutoring, more extracurriculars, than we would ever have

conceived of a generation ago. And some of the most heartrending emails that I get on my website are actually from adolescents hovering on the edge of burnout, pleading with me to write to their parents, to help them slow down, to help them get off this full-throttle treadmill. But thankfully, there is a backlash there in parenting as well, and you're finding that, you know, towns in the United States are now banding together and banning extracurriculars on a particular day of the month, so that people can, you know, decompress and have some family time, and slow down.

I look at kids now, and I'm just amazed by the way they race around with more homework, more tutoring, more extracurriculars, than we would ever have conceived of a generation ago.

Homework is another thing. There are homework bans springing up all over the developed world in schools which had been piling on the homework for years, and now they're discovering that less can be more. So there was a case up in Scotland recently where a fee-paying, high-achieving private school banned homework for everyone under the age of 13, and the high-achieving parents freaked out and said, "What are you -- you know, our kids will fall" -- the headmaster said, "No, no, your children need to slow down at the end of the day." And just this last month, the exam results came in, and in math, science, marks went up 20 percent on average last year. And I think what's very revealing is that the elite universities, who are often cited as the reason that people drive their kids and hothouse them so much, are starting to notice the caliber of students coming to them is falling. These kids have wonderful marks, they have CVs jammed with extracurriculars, to the point that would make your eyes water. But they lack spark, they lack the ability to think creatively and think outside -- they don't know how to dream.

And so what these Ivy League schools, and Oxford and Cambridge and so on, are starting to send a message to parents and students that they need to put on the brakes a little bit. And in Harvard, for instance, they send out a letter to undergraduates -- freshmen -- telling them that they'll get more out of life, and more out of Harvard, if they put on the brakes. If they do less, but give time to things, the time that things need, to enjoy them, to savor them. And even if they sometimes do nothing at all. And that letter is called -- very revealing, I think -- "Slow Down!" -- with an exclamation mark on the end.

So wherever you look, the message, it seems to me, is the same. That less is very often more, that slower is very often better. But that said, of course, it's not that easy to slow down, is it? I mean, you heard that I got a speeding ticket while I was researching my book on the benefits of slowness, and that's true, but that's not all of it. I was actually en route to a dinner held by Slow Food at the time. And if that's not shaming enough, I got that ticket in Italy. And if any of you have ever driven on an Italian highway, you'll have a pretty good idea of how fast I was going.

(Laughter)

But why is it so hard to slow down? I think there are various reasons. One is that -- that speed is fun -- you know, speed is sexy. It's all that adrenaline rush. It's hard to give it up. I think there's a kind of metaphysical dimension -- that speed becomes a way of walling ourselves off from the bigger, deeper questions. We fill our head with distraction, with busy-ness, so that we don't have to ask, am I well? Am I happy? Are my children growing up right? Are politicians making good decisions on my behalf? Another reason -- although I think, perhaps, the most powerful reason -- why we find it hard to slow down, is the cultural taboo that we've erected against slowing down. Slow is a dirty word in our culture. It's a byword for lazy, slacker, for being somebody who gives up. You know, "he's a bit slow." It's actually synonymous with being -- with being stupid.

I guess what the Slow Movement -- the purpose of the Slow Movement, or its main goal, really, is to tackle that taboo, and to say that -- that yes, sometimes slow is not the -- the answer, that there is such a thing as "bad slow." You know, that -- I got stuck on the M25, which is a ring road around London, recently, and spent three and a half hours there. And I can tell you, that's really bad slow. But the new idea, the sort of revolutionary idea of the Slow Movement, is that there is such a thing as "good slow," too. And good slow is, you know, taking the time to eat a meal with your family, with the TV switched off. Or -- taking the time to look at a problem from all angles in the office to make the best decision at work. Or even simply just taking the time to slow down and savor your life.

Now, one of the things that I found most uplifting about all of this stuff that's happened around the book since it came out, is the reaction to it. And I knew that when my book on slowness came out, it would be welcomed by the New Age brigade, but it's also been taken up, with great gusto, by the corporate world -- you know, sort of, business press, but also, you know, big companies and leadership organizations. Because people at the top of the chain, people like you, I think, are starting to realize that there's too much speed in the system, there's too much busy-ness, and it's time to find, or get back to, that lost art of shifting gears. Another encouraging sign, I think, is that it's not just in the developed world that this idea's been taken up. In the developing world, in countries that are on the verge of making that leap into first world status -- China, Brazil, Thailand, Poland, and so on -- these countries are -- have embraced the idea of the Slow Movement, many people in them, and there's a debate going on in their media, on the streets. Because I think they're looking at the West, and they're saying, "Well, we like that aspect of what you've got, but we're not so sure about that."

So all of that said, is it, I guess, is it possible? That's really the main question before us today. Is it possible to slow down? And I -- I'm happy to be able to say to you that the answer is a resounding yes. And I present myself as Exhibit A, a kind of reformed-and-rehabilitated speed-aholic. I still love speed. You know, I live in London, and I work as a journalist, and I enjoy the buzz and the busy-ness, and the adrenaline rush that comes from both of those things. I play squash and ice hockey, two very fast sports, and I wouldn't give them up for the world. But I've also, over the last year or so, got in touch with my inner tortoise.

(Laughter)

And what that means is that I don't -- I no longer overload myself gratuitously. My default mode is no longer to be a rush-aholic. I no longer hear time's winged chariot drawing near, or at least not as much as I did before. I can actually hear it now, because I see my time is ticking off. And the upshot of all of that is that I actually feel a lot happier, healthier, more productive, than I ever have. I feel like I'm -- I'm living my life rather than actually just racing

Slow is a dirty word in our culture. It's a byword for lazy, slacker, for being somebody who gives up. You know, "he's a bit slow." It's actually synonymous with being -- with being stupid.

through it. And perhaps, the most important measure of the success of this is that I feel that my relationships are a lot deeper, richer, stronger.

And for me, the -- I guess, the litmus test for whether this would work, and what it would mean, was always going to be bedtime stories, because that's sort of where the -- the journey began. And there too the news is rosy. I -- you know, at the end of the day, I go into my son's room. I don't wear a watch. I switch off my computer, so I can't

hear the email pinging into the basket, and I just slow down to his pace and -- and we read. And because children have their own tempo and internal clock, they don't do quality time, where you schedule 10 minutes for them to open up to you. They need you to move at their rhythm. I find that 10 minutes into a story, you know, my son will suddenly say, "You know, something happened in the playground today that really bothered me." And we'll go off and have a conversation on that. And I now find that bedtime stories used to be a kind of -- a box on my to-do list, something that I dreaded, because it was so slow and I had to get through it quickly. It's become my reward at the end of the day, something I really -- I really cherish. And I have a kind of Hollywood ending to my talk this afternoon, which goes a little bit like this.

A few months ago, I was getting ready to go on another book tour, and I had my bags packed. I was downstairs by the front door, and I was waiting for a taxi, and my son came down the stairs and he'd -- he'd made a card for me. And he was carrying it. He'd gone and stapled two cards, very like these, together, and put a sticker of his favorite character, Tintin, on the front. And he said to me, or he handed this to me, and -- and I read it, and it said, "To Daddy, love Benjamin." And I thought, "Aah, that's really sweet, you know, is that a good luck on the book tour card?" And he said, "No, no, no, Daddy -- this is a card for being the best story reader in the world." And I thought, "Yeah, you know, this slowing down thing ..." ■

TED talks worth spreading

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'HINTERLANDS OF HIGHSCHOOL MATH'

Dhananjay Joshi traded a thriving corporate career to teach highschoolers how to understand, perhaps even love, mathematics. He writes about the beginning of this journey.

The sigh of relief I breathed was probably heard across the seas, as a door closed on the industrial world for me after thirty years. I always wanted to teach despite the warnings of my teenage daughters. Here was my chance of a lifetime!

I enrolled myself and completed the certification program for teaching Mathematics at the high school level in United States at a reputed university in Chicago. All I had to do now was to complete two more semesters of teaching in any high school in Illinois and I was done. I would be the receptor of complete certification, rather than a provisional certification, good for only a year! The light at the end of the tunnel of transition, from a world of expectations to the world of making a difference in someone's life, was inviting!

I found a position. My friends warned me, "Why do you want to go there? It is the toughest district in the state. No one wants to learn. So many have quit because the gang members are running the show. Why do you want to put your life in danger?" I asked the little inner voice and it said, "Oh, come on, you haven't obeyed those comments all your life. Why now?" I accepted the position. I now have a badge that says 'TEACHER' and I wear it with pride and anticipation.

I have five classes. I am to teach Geometry and Algebra. I greeted my students at the door on the first day and they walked straight past me. This was the last place they wanted to be. The texting was loud

and clear and the look said, "Who is this teacher that claims to LOVE Math of all subjects?" I was scrambling to recall the techniques they taught us at the school for class management. I even desperately recalled my days at the high school I went to in India. I drew a blank. I prayed and I plunged ahead.

As I meet with each class and talk about my expectations, I see looks that say, "We've heard all this before." I persist. One student asked me, "Mr. Joshi (I DID ask them to call me that), how old are you?" I say, "75 years old." "Oh, shut up!" is the response I get! That would have earned me a hefty beating, when I was a teen back home in Pune. I smiled and carried on.

I am thinking "forces". One wants to achieve certain goals and there are always forces that will test one's resolve. What can I do? I have kids (or adults who have their own kids) that are concerned about things far beyond Math in class. The life-support systems of iPod and text-messaging enabled cell phones are devil incarnate. Making connections with life and why we want to learn Math, besides experiencing the thrill when one SOLVES a problem (This dude is UNREAL!), is what I struggle to convey.

Once I brought a cell phone to the class and told my students that the number of equations we have to solve to make the gadget work so that they can text their girlfriends was greater than hundreds. I showed them a National Football League playbook, larger than 1500

pages, and they see that if a quarterback doesn't REMEMBER the plays, not only he but the whole team is in trouble. I said, "Guys, one day you will remember a formula that would save someone's life!" They looked at me. I noticed that the number of kids staring into space had reduced by at least two or three. As an assignment, I gave them President Obama's speech to read, and asked them to underline the sentence they liked the most. A majority went for "This is no picnic for me either, buster!" by president Obama's mother.

I have just completed my fourth week at the school. In the first week of school, Idris had said, "I don't know what you are talking about, man." Now, I see him in the parking lot. He comes over. ACTUALLY walks over half the parking lot. He just extends his hand and shakes my hand. Doesn't say anything.

The seventeen-year-old girl sitting in the front row, who is pregnant in her eighth month, could not complete a test I gave some days ago, as she had to go to the nurses' station. I gave her a pass. Today, she scored 100/100 in my class.

I know I am reaching them. ■



DHANANJAY JOSHI is a teacher, statistician, meditator, and poet who loves to read. He is an idealist and can only do one thing at a time thanks to the years of Zen Buddhist training. He has no plans beyond the present moment—the big question is, how do things get done? He thanks his wife and daughters.



HOOKED ON BOOKS

Monita Sen, Primary Years Programme (PYP) Coordinator at an IB School, brings you the best teaching practices to share the book-love with your class

Text and Photos: Monita Sen

When it comes to reading, I believe that attitude is everything. The attitudes of the student, the teacher and the parent are all important in shaping what kind of reader a child will ultimately become. Often, as teachers, what we believe about reading deeply influences the way that we teach it in the classroom. At reading workshops I have conducted, one of the significant things I ask teachers to consider is their own personal histories as readers – Think about it: how did you learn to read? It's interesting to note that very few people remember being "taught" to read, although some people relate their ability to read to one specific person, usually a parent. It's safe to say that children who come from homes where books form a part of the furniture are likely to be more avid readers than those who do not. For me, I'm passionate about reading, so when it came to the point in my teaching career where I was required to teach reading, I was excited – and excitement is contagious!

When it comes to ideas on the teaching of reading and my beliefs about how children learn to read, I have a couple of "gurus" and I thank them for their inspiration. Mem Fox is one such guru - her books for children and adults are truly inspiring, in fact, I insist that all my teachers read her book "Radical Reflections" during the course of the year so they can be inspired in their teaching of reading and make magic in their classrooms. I believe that all teachers (and parents) should read aloud to children everyday - this is a good opportunity to model reading and also a great way for children to develop positive attitudes towards reading. I remember several years ago when I was teaching grade two, "story time" would be the part of the day that we looked forward to the most and regardless of gender, race or ability level, everyone was eager to get into the cosy reading corner - The story would come alive, I would do actions and accents while reading which often had the children (and me) rolling about with laughter. Although there was no explicit teaching of reading here there was definitely learning taking place. (In case you're not much of a drama queen/king, Mem Fox shares some great tips on reading aloud on her website www.memfox.net)

Another influential language guru is Michael Haliday who introduced the concept that language development occurs in three aspects: "learning language, learning about language and learning through language". A good reading programme needs to encompass all three aspects. One of the ways children learn to read is simply through reading itself - whether they are being read a story or looking at a picture book, the personal experience is important - and like any skill it gets better with practice. Learning



Language development occurs in three aspects: learning language, learning about language and learning through language. A good reading programme needs to encompass all three aspects.

about reading is where the teacher can support the skill through mini-lessons and explicit teaching of strategies for reading. Learning through reading is a collaborative effort where the skill is put in context, perhaps in a literature circle or in other areas of the

curriculum where children are required to read something contextually. Teachers need to ensure that there is ample opportunity for children to engage with reading both independently and socially.

Today's classrooms are more diverse than they have ever been. Differentiated instruction is the need of the hour as "one size doesn't fit all" according to Differentiation Queen, Carol Ann Tomlinson. One of the first steps in differentiating instruction is to become a student of your students - in this case, not just their abilities, but their attitudes towards reading and their past experiences. I remember once reading about a child who said that "reading made his legs hurt" this was because the teacher always made the student stand while reading!

My first experience with differentiating instruction in a reading programme was totally a trial and error experiment. I had thirty grade three children at different reading levels, some were reading novels and others were just learning the alphabet in English; some loved reading and some just did not. I explored grouping and regrouping students on a variety of tasks related to reading and finally found a balance that worked well with that particular group of students.

I think this is the key - we have to find something that will "hook" students into reading! The programme consisted of some guided reading sessions that were quite structured and focused not only on the stories but the skill of reading; independent reading sessions also happened where children enjoyed the freedom of choice with regards to the book they wanted to read. There was a home reading programme where

children were given age-appropriate books to read aloud (or be read to) with family and there were times set aside during the school day solely for silent reading.

During this time I would make it a point, as the teacher, to take a book and read myself or listen to a student who wanted to read to me. Basically a culture of reading was being created. This meant that children were reading anything between three to ten books a week and this really had a positive effect on their reading and writing skills.

More recently, I worked with a grade five team of teachers and students in connection to a unit of study called "Changes in Me". This unit looked at the concept of change, growth and the onset of adolescence. We selected a novel to study in connection with this unit - 'Tuck Everlasting' by Natalie Babbitt. Together we set out on a journey to investigate the story and its conceptual connection to the unit. We abandoned all norms of novel study that dictated we must do chapters and related comprehension activities - we sat in a circle and joined hands before we began our group reading sessions and we said the circle spell:

"Welcome to the Literature circle.

In the circle we are all the same, yet have the right to share our own thoughts and feelings freely.

In the circle we are confident and safe to celebrate the magic of books.

In the circle we are thinkers with minds ticking away with what we hear.

All teachers and parents should rediscover the excitement and passion of reading so they can pass on this precious gift to children.

In the circle we respect the book and what it can teach us.

We are the circle."

I have to say the children were somewhat surprised by this slightly "spiritually dramatic" approach to reading a novel but they were quickly on board - we all love a bit of drama after all! Over the next few weeks, we read as a whole group, discussing our personal connections to the book, we read in small groups for a purpose and we read individually to understand and reflect. Along the way we identified structures and forms in writing (paragraphs, alliterations, punctuation) and also tools that the writer used to communicate to us (imagery, dialogue, tension). Tasks were differentiated to match readiness levels, interests and learning styles. We constantly sought feedback from the students about their thoughts, their preferences and their learning and incorporated their ideas and suggestions in future lessons, giving them ownership of their learning. This approach to language as 'whole language,' helps children to see language as something living - as a part of life - rather than something that simply needs to be "learnt" at school.

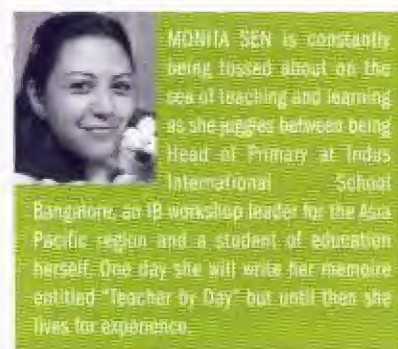
As Head of primary at my present school, I encourage

teachers to be creative in their approach to teaching reading. We have a strong culture of professional reading and reflection so that teachers can share ideas and best practices with each other. Parents also play an important role in our reading programme. Parents volunteer on a weekly basis to come in and read with groups or individuals during reading workshops - this is great for the students as it gives them a varied and authentic audience and helps to make the experience that little bit more special. On any given day you will see students and parents dotted about the campus in little groups, enjoying a good yarn. We also conduct workshops for the parents who volunteer so they can understand more about learning to read and ways to encourage the children.

All teachers and parents should rediscover the excitement and passion of reading so they can pass on this precious gift to children. I'm reminded of a quote from one of my favourite authors, the inspiring Dr. Seuss, on reading (from "I Can Read With My Eyes Shut!");

"The more you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go"

Happy travelling! ■



RECOMMENDED READING

Text: Aravinda A.



THE GUDBUDS GET OUT OF A MESS

Swati Jainapurkar & Jeyanthi Manokaran (Artwork)

Centre for Learning Resources

ISBN 81-89883-12-7



I was thrilled to get my hands on the Gudbuds! A series of books published by

CLR, Pune, they 'focus on basic human values' but not at all preachy. They are fairly inexpensive, great quality, and easy to read.

In *The Gudbuds Get Out of a Mess*, you meet Mama Gudbud, the bookworm, Papa Gudbud who enjoys gardening, Gauri Gudbud who likes climbing trees and Gundu Gudbud who loves his dog Raja Gudbud. What they dislike is washing clothes and as the days go by, let the dirty clothes pile up. Until one day when Grandpa and Grandma Gudbud announce that they'll be visiting. They can now incur Grandpa's wrath or find another way around the problem. That will mean teamwork, and everyone, including Raja must pitch in and help.

Very sweet, very simple stories

but it was the artwork that made me greedily turn the pages. Each spread carries an entire scenario created with little clay figures, clay houses, down to a thatched roof, little plants, clothes, a bucket and brush - absolutely delightful!

And what a great way to talk about values! I especially liked how it's not just the kids who are lazy but the adults too! The other books in the series are *Mama Gudbud Takes a Break* and *At the Park in Gudbudland*. These introduce more Gudbuds and more families to the reader and take on topics that break stereotypes and those that most children will relate to. All the books come with a set of questions at the back that teachers and parents can use to initiate a discussion around the books. But more than anything, they are just good fun to read! Published in English, Hindi and Marati, and available through the Independent Publishers' Distribution Alternatives (ipda.in) or the CLR site (clrindia.net)

GHOST OF THE MOUNTAINS

Sujatha Padmanabhan and

Madhuvanti Anantharajan

Kalpavriksh

It is always exciting to see books from or set in remote regions of India. And it's always interesting to see titles that come from indie publishers and organizations trying to create awareness about their work. Kalpavriksh is one such environment action group based in Pune with the snow leopard

conservancy as a focus area (there are only 5000 of them in the world - that's how endangered they are!)

Ghost of the Mountains comes after Sujatha Padmanabhan spent some time in Ladakh, as part of her conservation work. It's inspired by a true story that took place here.

In this beautifully illustrated book, Rigzin a young lad lives in the Ladakhi village of Ang. One morning as he gets ready to help put up the prayer flags at the monastery, his friend Jigmet calls him. There's a *shan* or a snow leopard in the house of one of the villagers. The villagers are angrily shouting outside as the snow leopard has killed the livestock, leaving only a baby calf. As they wait for the headman to come, Rigzin climbs the roof of the *lhas* where the snow leopard is locked in. He sees in amazement, as the ghost of the mountains looks right back at him. "A real, live snow leopard!"

The villagers are angry and Rigzin decides to act. He saves the trembling calf even as the disbelieving villagers distract the snow leopard. With that out of the way, they want nothing more than making the snow leopard "pay" by killing it. Rigzin tries to reason with them by talking about how few there are left in the world. And they say, "The fewer snow leopards we have around, the safer are our livestock." Rigzin eventually saves the animal, and makes the villagers understand how they can protect their livestock and the snow leopard too.

One does see books from the west on conservation and the

environment and it's good to see more of them from India as well. *Ghost of the Mountains* has its facts woven into the story and drives home an important message. Madhuvanti Anantharajan's illustrations and design are beautiful. I recommend you buy this book – the proceeds from its sale go towards snow leopard conservation. Available via the Kalpavriksh website (kalpavriksh.org) Also look for *Chuskit Goes to School* by the same author – also set in Ladakh and published by Read India.



BEASTLY ARMS

Patrick Jennings
Simon & Schuster
ISBN
9780439165907

I read this book and have been insisting that everyone I know read it – it's one of those that will not disappoint! There are a great many things I like about it, starting with how little Nick's mother calls him Nickel (because he's a little boy!) and how Nickel's pet is a kangaroo rat called Miriam, how Nickel sees a different species of animal in everybody (spider monkey, gray fox, walrus!). Set in the bustling city, you begin to see it through Nickel's eyes. He's quite the artist who, with his grandfather's camera slung down his neck, walks on the roads seeing something marvelous in everything; he sees entire stories in cloud formations even.

When their landlord raises the rent, Nick and his mother, a

photography instructor, need to find another place soon. Unwilling to settle for the option of living in the suburbs, Nick joins in the apartment hunting and finds the Beastly Arms, with a rent lower than they expected to pay.

They move in despite Nick's mother saying it's creepy. Nick doesn't think it's creepy although he cannot figure out which animal Mr Beastly is, and why he never meets the other occupants of the building. And there, there are these noises at night that make him wonder what's going on.

Armed with camera, Nick sets out to see for himself and lands in a veritable zoo!

For kids who are interested in photography, there are quite a few details included. For those who like animals, there are a great many names that come in to describe people, and for those looking for a good story, this is a book I insist that you pick up. ■

Courtesy:

HIPPOCAMPUS

www.thehippocampus.in

THE GOOD READING GUIDE

1. *Carlo Likes Reading* by Jessica Spadyoi Ages 0-3
2. *Library Mouse: A Friend's Tale* by Daniel Kirk 3-5
3. *Gregory and the Magic Line* by Dawn Pigot 3-5
4. *The Gubbids Get Out of A Mess (The Gubbids)* 5-7
5. *The Spectacular Spectacle Man* by Vishaka Chanchani 5-7
6. *Micawber* by John Lithgow & CE Payne 5-7
7. *Dear Mrs Li Rui: Letters from Obedience School* by Mark Teague 5-7
8. *Ghost of the Mountains* by Sujatha Padmanabhan 7-9
9. *The House where Cockroaches Live to a Ripe Old Age* by Yoram Kanouk 7-9
10. *A Fine White Dust* by Cynthia Rytant 7+
11. *Beastly Arms* by Patrick Jennings 9-12
12. *Night of the Living Veg (Buster Bayless)* by Philip Reeve 9-12
13. *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, And Me, Elizabeth* by El Konigsburg 9-12
14. *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen 12+
15. *The Other Side of Truth* by Beverley Naidoo 12+
16. *Hero Lies Arthur* by Philip Reeve 12+
17. *Beast* by Ally Kennen Young Adults
18. *Crushed* by Laura and Tom McNeal Young Adults
19. *The Vicar of Niblewicke* by Roald Dahl For Teachers
20. *Why Make Art* by Elizabeth Newbery For Teachers



ARAVINDA A.
Joined Hippocampus to be around books. Likes writing and tries to earn a living from it. Loves the company of dogs. Agrees completely with the unch Zeh master who said, "I never got lost because I don't know where I'm going."

RAY OF HOPE FOR DISABLED CHILDREN LUDHIANA

1,000 physically challenged students suffering from orthopaedic problems will be able to stand on their own feet, thanks to a programme started by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).

The children will undergo surgery under SSA's programme 'Inclusive Education For The Disabled'. In collaboration with three hospitals in the city, the department is providing a free of cost treatment for these students. The facility would be a boon for the students, who find it difficult to bear the expenses of surgery.

Under the programme, a resource person in every block of the district checks the health of students and sends a report to the department. After this, doctors at health awareness camps assess whether a student needs artificial limbs or surgery. Last year, 1,839 students were examined in the district by a team of four doctors, experts in different fields.

REMEDIAL TEACHING BANGALORE

TComissioner of Public Instruction Kumar G Naik who announced the SSLC results on Friday, explained that one of the reasons for pass percentage improvement could be

introduction of remedial teaching in schools, where special classes are held for students outside school hours who need extra coaching. Subject-wise, mathematics continues to challenge Karnataka's students. "This year, the overall pass percentage in maths is better with 82.21. Last year, maths, at 72.77%, happened to be one of the reasons for the dip in the results," Naik said. Third language got the highest pass percentage with 93.90.

Difficult to digest is the fact that 174 students have got zero in first language while 296 students scored 100%. Students who have secured 0% would have either given the wrong answer or left the answer sheet blank. Similarly, 35 schools have recorded zero percentage of which one is a government school, two aided and remaining unaided. "We will write to these schools asking them to give reasons for poor performance. Based on the reply, appropriate measures will be taken," said director of secondary education Chidreshankaraiah Swamy.

WALL-LESS SCHOOL MOCKS TALL VOWS GUWAHATI

This Kalapani is not the cellular jail in the midst of a swirling bay. But the images from Guwahati's Kalapani are as stark as its infamous namesake. Standing in the middle of Kalapani char is a bare structure without any

NEWSBYTES

walls and a leaking roof – No. 1 South Kalapani Primary School. Elections have come and gone, governments have changed – both at the state and Centre – but the school's condition has remained the same. No desks or benches. The school does not even have a headmaster for the past 12 years. No teacher either for over a decade. The school is a case study of successive governments' apathy towards the most fundamental of the voters' rights – primary education.

Set up in 1980, the school caters to nearly 15 villages in and around the area but has seen nothing that goes by the name of government aid. It now has 70 students but no teachers. Educated youths of the villages take turns to teach, and that, too, when they have the time. Md Shurat Zaman, a resident of Kalapani char and a social worker, said: "Ever since the previous headmaster retired in 1997, the school is headless. The government, too, has not appointed any teachers".

"Some of the youths of the village voluntarily took up teaching at the school," he said and added that this is one of the worst examples how the much-hyped Sarva Siksha Abhiyan Mission works. "The classes in the school depend entirely on weather conditions. It is possible to take classes only on sunny days, as there is no wall and a leaking tin roof. We cannot take classes on rainy days, not to talk of floods," said

Md Taj Uddin Ahmed, one of the honorary teachers at the school. "Not only this school – the whole Kalapani char wears the same dilapidated condition. This char and several other chars in the vicinity – Pagladiya char, Bengenati char and Sialmari char – are visible to the political leaders only during elections," said Ahmed.

"Can we call it a school? There are no desks, no benches and no table.... nothing. There are no walls either and the decades-old tin roof cannot save you from the rain," said Azizur Rahman, a resident near the school, adding school-time is just "time-pass for the young boys of the village".

EXAMINATIONS, THE DIGITAL WAY COIMBATORE

In their path-breaking journey from conventional teaching to e-learning, some universities have travelled the extra mile to introduce online examination. In fact, this happened a year ago. The students of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), Coimbatore, took their mid-semester examinations online as early as April 2008. From delivery of question paper to evaluation, everything was done online. The scores were sent to the students through email.

The next step in this direction will be digital marksheets. However, the university's faculty which has devised the whole system feels that it has to strengthen the examination

system before venturing into digital marksheets. According to V. Valluvaparidasan, Controller of Examinations, TNAU, the university will have to make a policy decision on introducing digital marksheets. A similar achievement was made by Anna University, Coimbatore, recently when it adopted an integrated Examination Management System (EMS).

In this system, a whole range of processes – registration of candidates, publication of results, printing of marksheets and certificates, and so on – are done online. It is also expected to encompass other examination processes such as hall ticket generation, secure delivery of question papers, multiple digital evaluation, tracking of students' performance and performance analysis. The system, provided by Mindlogix Infotech Limited, is implemented in such a way that the university serves as a Networking Centre with affiliated colleges as the Examination Data Centres.

The system was introduced in a gradual way. The university has not yet ventured into online examinations. The overall system will be based on SGPA (Semester Grade Point Average) and CGPA (Cumulative Grade Point Average) rather than marks. The 9-point scheme of the international system of grading will be followed. Chennai-based Odyssey Technologies has developed Altasigna, a software that can generate large-scale digital

documents. Commenting on implementation of digital exams and marksheets in universities, Robert Raja, director of the company says, "Despite the benefits involved, a digital document falls short of its physical equivalent with respect to confidentiality, authentication, integrity and non-repudiation. Therefore, a digital document has to be digitally signed and frozen in such a way that tampering is impossible."

Stephan Balzter, representative of German Academic Exchange Service, Chennai, says "Issuing of digital marksheets can speed up the admission procedure to some extent. The time wasted on cross-verification with the Indian university with regard to the student's marks secured can be saved."

"Digital marksheet system can cut down cost and it will be convenient as well as it can be stored even in a mobile phone. Also, students need not waste time for getting the marksheets attested," says Mr. Raja.

"Digital marksheets as a genuine proof of marks in future can eliminate faking scores and degrees. Apart from being hassle-free, it simplifies the application procedure for applying for internships, research programmes and higher education overseas. Marksheet verification procedure can also be eliminated," says N. Namrita, III year engineering student of S.A. Engineering College,

Chennai. "But the responsibility of the company creating this technology will be huge. Because, once hacked, the consequences can be dire. The software must make sure other websites do not replicate the results published," she says.

According to vice-chancellor of Anna University, Coimbatore, R. Radhakrishnan, the digital shift will aid in managing examinations virtually in a transparent, efficient and foolproof manner. "We will try to get the first set of digital marksheets ready by July. It will come with international security barcode and authentication. Hence, there will be no question as to its genuineness. Also, it cannot be downloaded or photocopied."

COUNSELLING TO CUT DROPOUT RATE IN CIVIC SCHOOLS PUNE

The Pune Municipal Corporation School Board has decided to appoint a counsellor for each of its 271 schools to prevent students from dropping out. A lot of students have been quitting studies midway. At least 6,000 children quit studies in 301 private, aided and unaided government schools last year. Of these, 386 dropped out due to socio-cultural reasons.

Moreover, a recent study by the Maharashtra Institute of Mental Health (MIMH), which was part of the school mental health project to assess schoolchildren

for psychological morbidity, found that at least 25 children from a total of 1,100 had quit school, either due to conflicts in the family or because of an alcoholic father.

"To check dropouts, the school board last month appointed counsellors to sensitise parents and teachers on child behaviour patterns," says Bhushan Nalge, coordinator, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The school mental health project also has counsellors at three municipal schools on a pilot basis. Says Dr Alka Pawar, director, MIMH, "Our study selected 1,100 students from three municipal schools around Sassoon Road. At least 25 children had quit due to family related problems, and six due to psychiatric illness like adjustment disorders. Eleven children were mentally challenged. However, there was no severe mental retardation."

The District Planning and Development Committee had sanctioned Rs 5 lakh for the study. Pawar said they specifically selected corporation schools, as most children from the lower socio-economic strata do not complete their entire schooling. ■

http://203.200.40.161/infocds/activeNews_categories.asp?catID=1

RIGHT TOUCH, WRONG TOUCH

TALKING ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE WITH YOUR CHILD

The school boasts central air-conditioning, but the air hangs tepid and stale in its cavernous lobby. Even the fairly routine duties of being a parent—text-book purchase and the payment of tuition—is made tedious at this posh Delhi school by the absence of any sense of society, by the pushing and shoving in queues, and even the occasional vituperative exchange between someone's father and someone else's granny.

That morning, glass doors slid open and three or four parents charged into the lobby. The few parents waiting with me listened as avidly as I did as someone alternated between anguish and anger. His child, he said, had been molested on the school bus the previous day and he was there to wreak vengeance. I remember the mother was weeping. I remember thinking that the father looked like he wanted the freedom to weep. I remember that I wanted to weep. The school staff were frantic that this disturbance be kept as quiet as possible. A number of them, my three children's excellent and compassionate educators, were waving their arms and repeating shooing people away.

"Shooooo!"

I made discreet enquiries over the next few days. What happened after the parents were hustled off into the Principal's office? I suggested that the school should see the incident as an opportunity to educate staff, parents and children in preparedness. "Preparedness for what," was the shocked response from teachers. For the inevitable, I wanted to say. But couldn't. After all, we were all so intent on being discreet at that point. So ruled by the "Shooooo".

Yet, the statistics on sexual abuse, wherever in the world the subject is studied, are alarming. One country's research indicates that upto 36% of girls and 29% of boys have suffered child sexual abuse; another study reveals upto 46% of girls and 20% of boys have experienced sexual coercion (The 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights).

These statistics don't cover the many incidents of child abuse that are never reported. Nor do the numbers tell of children approached by perpetrators, who escape abuse because they send a message to the perpetrator that they are not available as victims.

I am interested in the policies we set up in schools to prevent the approach of the perpetrator— a female attendant will always be on the bus with the male driver of the bus. But I am also equally interested in nurturing a school environment that empowers the child so that when the perpetrator finds a breach in policies, the child encountered is one prepared to say 'No'. The prepared child is not afraid to say 'No' to an adult, be he a respected friend or relative of the family, the coach, the teacher, the priest, or any authority figure no matter where, be it the public bathroom, bus, cinema hall or neighbourhood. The prepared child is a threat to the perpetrator who thrives in an atmosphere of secrecy and shame. The prepared child knows that no matter the circumstances, threats involved and fear instilled, the parent is to be told immediately.

I prepare my three children, who at some point in their life will inevitably be approached, by helping them understand

'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' touch. I prepare my children by asking them, 'What if someone asks you to sit on their lap. What if they tickle you while you are seated there? What if they pull the elastic in your underwear and say it is by mistake?'

My children, as all children, know what feels comfortable and right to them, and they are able to tell me what that is. The beauty of 'what if' questions is that they allow me access to my children's thinking prior to my telling them what my thinking is. In the kind of open and trusting dialogue built by this technique, I can tell them very definitively that their instincts about right and wrong will always be backed by me. If the kissing and tickling actions of others make them uncomfortable, they are to say 'No'. They practice their 'No' with me till it is loud and firm.

At my children's school, the bus driver was beaten up and gotten rid of. Perhaps, he now works as a bus driver in some other school. In the two or so years since the incident, the school has not instituted any sort of curriculum related to preventing sexual abuse. ■



MRIDULA KOSHY is a writer. Her first book, 'If It Is Sweet', a collection of short stories, was released by Trunquel Press in May 2009. She makes her home in Delhi where she lives with her three children—Saleem,

Aashay, Surya - and her partner - Michael. She blogs at <http://mridulakoshy.blogspot.com>.

